

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

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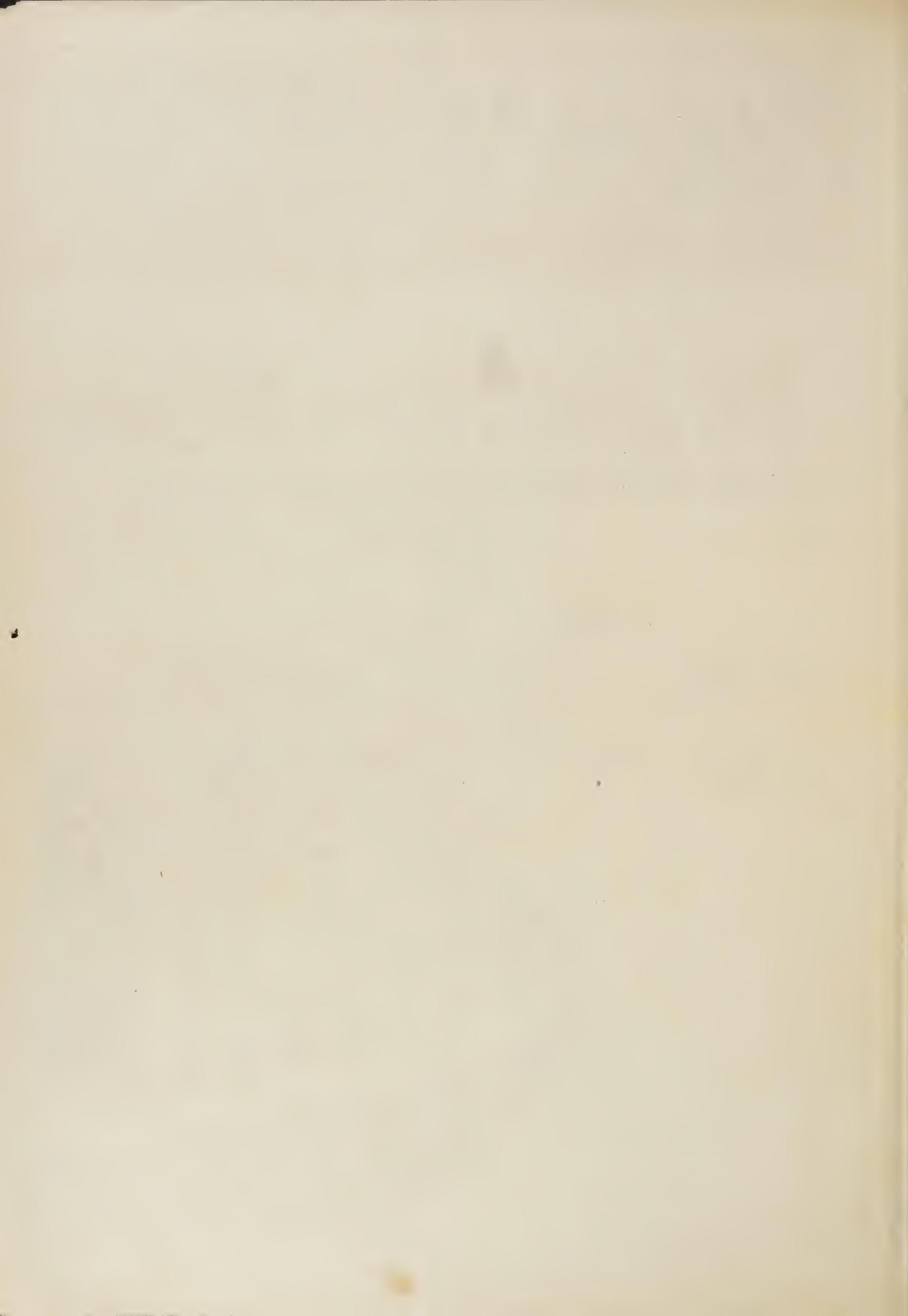
THE JAMES BOYS AFLOAT:

OR THE WILD ADVENTURES OF A DETECTIVE ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

BY D.W. STEVENS.



"Haul in the lines," roared Ciell Miller. In a moment the little tug was under way. A man was seen running down to the river. "Ho! Stop that boat!" he cried. But it continued to go on. Bang! went a pistol, and Jesse James fell.



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CHAPTER I.

THE FORTUNE TELLER.

One dark night, several years ago, three men were standing on the corner of a street in Burlington. It was drizzling, and the fine rain dampened the coats of each.

They all wore slouched hats and long coats, with high boots.

In fact, coats, boots and hats were about all that was visible of them, save the underpart of their faces, on which were long beards. They were in a lonely part of the city, and, as it was quite dark, no one could be seen anywhere around. The distant tramp of a policeman on his lonely beat was the only sound that came to their ears.

"Well, what's on tap for to-night?" asked one.

After a few moments' silence the tallest and largest of the three said:

"Let's go up to Mother Thompson's."

"Thompson, Mother Thompson? Who is she?"

"Don't you know her?"

"No."

"She is the old fortune teller up on Grace street."

"The old fortune teller? What are you going there for, Jess?"

"To have my fortune told, of course," was the reply.

"Have your fortune told, ha, ha, ha! Do you believe in such nonsense?"

"Yes; why not?"

"Well, Jess, that's another of your mad freaks."

"Well, what shall we do—go to the boat and float down the river, dark as it is, or shall we have fun with the old fortune teller? You can have your choice, Wood Hite."

Wood Hite scra'ched his head for a moment in a perplexed sort of way, and said:

"And you, Bill Caldwell?"

"Anything," Bill answered, shivering with cold. "This would be a glorious night, though, for horses."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the man called Wood Hite. "Bill never has his mind far away from horses."

"Oh, I love a noble horse."

"Don't you love to steal to the barn where you know a noble horse is feeding? Have your horse at the door, and listen and watch around the corners to see if anyone is in earshot or view? You creep to the gate, you gaze off at the house and ask yourself again

and again if you are being watched. The dog barks and you have to wait until he is quiet. Then you go to the barn door. Ah! how your hands tremble! How numb your fingers seem to be! At last you have opened the door, flashed the light over the barn and see your beauty. You get a saddle for his back, a bridle for his mouth, lead him forth and gently close the door.

"Ah! how you listen to see if you are observed. But all is quiet. How know you but that some one is watching you at this very moment with a deadly rifle aimed at your heart? But it is pleasant. Danger always is. We all like chances. You lead the horse from the gate down the road for a long distance before you venture to mount.

"Then you mount. You may not be safe even yet. A bullet may strike you in the back; but you gallop away down the road faster and faster, and now you feel the exultation and joy of having stolen a horse."

After a moment's silence the man called Jesse, who was none other than Jesse James, the bandit king of America, said:

"Well, Wood Hite, you talk very much as if you had had some experience of the kind yourself."

"No; I am relating Bill Caldwell's."

Bill chuckled a low, husky laugh, and said:

"You don't know much about it."

"You do, Bill?"

"Yes; I've been all through it."

"Get scorched?" put in Jesse.

"Well, I've had bullets several times come almost near enough to scorch me, but never got a bad hit."

The damp, chilly air was not congenial to comfort loving Jesse James, and he said:

"Let us go somewhere."

"All right; to Mother Thompson's, then, if you will," said Wood Hite.

"Come on."

"Lead the way."

"Boys," said Jesse, cautiously, "you must all keep your eyes open, for remember we are in Burlington now."

"Yes."

"We've got no friends here."

"We know it."

"If we should be suspected here we will be hauled over the coals at a lively rate, let me assure you."

"We comprehend all that, Jesse," said Wood Hite; "but, then,

none of the police here suspect us, and I don't think any of Pinkerton's men are on to us."

"Oh, by the way, did you hear of Pinkerton's last plan?"

"No. What was it?"

"He was so highly incensed at the loss of his man John W. Wicher, that he determined at all hazards to exterminate us, and he has engaged for that purpose his shrewdest detective."

"Who?"

"Dick Wright."

"Dick Wright? I never heard of him," said Wood Hite.

"Never heard of him? Well, I have, and I don't want anything to do with him."

"Have you met him?"

"No."

"He tried to make an appointment with you, didn't he?" asked Jesse, with a laugh.

"Yes, and followed me all the way into Texas to insist on it, but I declined his invitation."

"You had borrowed a horse?"

"Yes, two of them. But Dick Wright is a bold, desperate, terrible fellow."

"I'll tell you what I shall do to him," said Jesse James.

"What?"

"Shoot him on sight."

"As you would a wolf."

"That's it."

"That is the thing to do."

"Well, come on: we'll go to Mother Thompson's."

The three men went down the street a short distance, and then crossing an open lot ascended a hill and came to a small hovel which stood alone out in the suburbs of the city.

The house was dark, and had a deserted appearance.

After a careful reconnoissance Jesse boldly approached the door. Rap, rap, rap! went Jesse's knuckles against the door.

There was no answer.

Rap, rap, rap!

Silence still.

"Perhaps she is not at home," suggested Wood Hite.

"She is," said Jesse.

"How do you know?"

"She never goes away. Here goes for a louder summons."

Rap, rap, rap!

"Now, if that don't do the door gets my fist next."

It didn't do, or, at least there was no answer to his summons.

Then Jesse raised his brawny arm and struck the door a blow with his fist which made the building shake to its very foundation.

"If that don't rouse the old broomstick rider I'll try my boot and kick it down."

They waited a moment, when they heard a sound within like some one shuffling about.

After a few moments a small port-hole-like window was flung open, and a small head with a shriveled face, all wrapped in a coarse flannel, was poked out of the window and a squeaky old voice asked:

"Wot cher want, anyway?"

"We want to come in, Mother Broomstick Rider."

"Wot kin yer want wi' sich a pore old body like me?"

"We'll tell when we get inside," Jesse answered.

The old woman was ill at ease, and yet she dared not refuse them.

She opened the door and appeared before them with a tallow candle in her hand.

"Won't yer come in, gentlemen, won't yer come in?" she said.

"Certainly," said Jesse. "That's just what we have been trying to do."

"Hev seats, won't ye?"

"That we will. Shut the door, Bill, and stop the disagreeable draught."

Bill Caldwell closed the door and took a seat near an old rickety table. The room was poor and scantily furnished, and the single stove in the building had no fire in it.

The floor was carpetless, and the table had no cloth spread upon it.

In a rude cupboard, made of an old dry-goods box and some shelves, were a few dishes, the property of the woman.

"Well, old Mother Broomstick Rider," said Jesse James when all were seated, "get ready for a sail."

"What d'yer mean?" she asked.

"A flight through the air. Don't you know what that means?"

"No."

"Then get the cards."

"Oh, ye! Ye nice gentlemen wants me ter tell ye fortunes."

"That's about it. Now go ahead, heave along, and let's hear what you've got to say."

The old woman hobbled away to a shelf and brought back with

her a miserably greasy pack of cards, which she laid on the table, and with a grin on her hideously ugly face, said:

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"Want fortunes told."

"All."

"All av ye?"

"Yes."

The old hag chuckled a moment, and said:

"Waal, that air purty good."

"You'll make the more. Come now, conjure up your wicked, foul spirits of the air, and give us a taste of your brimstone."

"Whose'll I tell first?"

"Mine," said Jesse.

"All right, I'll do it."

Then she shuffled the cards for some moments, mixing them thoroughly.

"Cut."

He divided them.

Then she shuffled once more, and taking up one half began throwing down the cards rapidly.

"Oha!"

"What's the matter?" Jesse asked.

"You're married."

"Well, who said I wasn't?"

"Oh, yer a sly un."

"Go away, old Mother Broomstick Rider, give it to us fast and free."

"Yes, yer got a wife."

"Of course. What of that?"

"Say, you seed some trouble."

"Who hasn't?"

"Your life's been a wild one."

"Never mind what it's been. It's what it's going to be that interests me most. I come here to have my fortune told, not to tell it myself."

"You've been a soldier, I guess. There's lots o' dead men."

"Hang it! what do I care for all that. Tell me what I am going to do to-morrow."

"Yer goin' on a journey."

"Oh! am I?"

"Yes."

"Land or water?"

"Water."

"How soon will I start?"

"Before to-morrow."

"Before to-morrow? A moment ago you said to-morrow."

"Well, ye'll be on that journey or voyage to-morrow. Ye'll go down the river."

"Tell me something I don't know."

The old woman, whose temper was not the best in the world, became a little roused at this, and cried:

"Well, ef ye know what yer fortun iz ter be, why'd yer come ter me ter tell it ter ye?"

"Go ahead, old bedlam."

"Now, lookee here, mister, I don't want any more yer sass."

"Go on."

"I ken tell yer suthin' ye don't want ter know."

"Tell it."

"Well, ye'll die a dog's death, so yer will."

Jesse James turned a little pale at this, but keeping up his bragadocio spirit, he said:

"Well, boys, it's no use to worry about anything that's to happen fifty or sixty years from now."

"Ye'll be shot by a friend."

"A friend?" said Jesse, and he grew intensely pale.

"Yes, shot in the back by one ye like. Ha, ha, ha! Thar's gold in it. He, he, he! Ye'll be sold for money."

"Oh, well, when is this auction to come off?"

"Not soon."

"Then I won't worry."

"But keep your eyes open."

"I will."

"Keep yer eyes open, I say. Keep yer eyes open. Ye'll need ter hev all yer senses about yer."

"How about this voyage?"

"Ye'll come out o' it."

"All right?"

"Alive."

"Well, if I get out of it alive I'll run my chances on it being all right."

"I reckon ye'll make it, though."

"How about the money?"

The old woman chuckled, as she answered:

"Oh, I see gold, gold, jist lots o' gold."

"You do?"

"Yes."
 "Is it mine?"
 "I reckin so."
 "Where is it?"
 "Waal, thar's boats."
 "Oh, yes, the river is full of boats, and we might take a voyage down on a boat, you know."
 "Reckin as yer mought."
 "How fur will we travel?"
 "Ever so many miles."
 "Do you see a steamboat?"
 "Yes."
 "Where?"
 "On the river. Thar's fogs and clouds all erbout it, so's I can't see it very plain at all, but I reckin it air thar."
 Jesse James and his companions exchanged glances.
 If these noted bandits had no faith in the fortune telling of the old woman, they showed very strong signs of believing her.
 The old woman continued to deal out the cards, pause, point at them and count to herself.
 At last a queen lay on the table.
 Looking up she said:
 "Thar's a purty face."
 "There is no woman in the case," he answered.
 "Thar is."
 "How do you know?"
 "I see her."
 "I've never seen her."
 "Yer will."
 "What will she have to do with it, Mother Thompson?"
 "Er great deal more'n you think she will."
 "Where does she come in?"
 "On this voyage."
 "Anybody else?"
 "A lover."
 "Well, it's neither of us."
 "I don't know. I see him here in the keards, lem me tell yer."
 "Well, what else?"
 "All dim."
 "Dim?"
 "It's red."
 Jesse's face grew pale.
 "Red and yeller. Red in blood and yeller wi' gold."
 Jesse James laughed.
 "You old humbug, go on."
 "I won't," cried the old woman.
 "Why?"
 "Yer make sport o' my powers, ye make light o' my charms. Now, go, ye dogs. Go, all of ye, to dogs' deaths."
 "What do ye mean?" asked Wood Hite.
 "I mean ye'll all die like dogs. Ye'll be shot down."
 "Come, boys, let's go," said Jesse. "We'll not listen to any more of this nonsense."
 "Nonsense, yer call it. Oh, ye'll larn 'tain't no nonsense—ye'll larn 'tis rale. You two," pointing at Jesse James and Wood Hite, will die at the hands o' friends. And you," pointing at Bill Chadwell, "in a far away place whar ye've got no friends. All around ye is fire and smoke and death, and ye'll be buried as ye've lived—a thief."
 "Let's go," said Bill.
 "Go, all on ye. Despise me, do ye? Waal, go, but ye'll see that Kitty Thompson tells ther hull truth erbout it, an' so yer will."
 They hurried from the house, leaving the old woman hurling her bitterest maledictions at their heads.

CHAPTER II.

JESSE AND FRANK IN THE COAL CELLAR.

The trio hurried from the house down the hill toward the boat. None of them were pleased with what the old woman had said.
 "What do you think of it, Jesse?" asked Wood Hite.
 "She's an old liar."
 "Did you have any faith in what she said?"
 "No."
 "Nor I."
 "Nor I," put in Bill Chadwell.
 "Halt!" commanded Jesse.
 They all stopped.
 For a moment not a man moved or scarcely breathed aloud.
 At last Wood whispered:
 "What do you see, Jess?"
 "A flitting shadow."
 "Where?"
 "Just below us."

Each man laid his hand on the butt of a reliable pistol. The mist or drizzle had now become a fine rain, and their thick garments were rapidly becoming soaked.
 The flitting shadow had disappeared behind an old shed of a building.
 "I don't like that maneuver," Jesse whispered, and a moment later he cocked his revolver.
 A dark form about the size of an overgrown pumpkin was seen looming up behind a corner of the old building.
 Crack! went Jesse's revolver.
 The flash and report were followed by the disappearance of the object, whatever it might have been.
 "What was it, Jesse?" Bill asked.
 "It looked very much like a man's head with a hat on it."
 "You bored through it, whatever it was."
 "I rather think I did."
 "It dropped."
 "I never miss that close."
 A low whistle came from around the shed.
 "What!" cried Jesse. "That's Frank's whistle. I know that whistle. It is Frank."
 "Then you killed him."
 "Not much," whispered a voice from around the shed.
 "Frank, Frank."
 "Well."
 "Come here."
 "Jess, you're a fool to be blazing away at everything you see," said Frank James, hurrying around the shed to join his brother and his companions.
 "What are you doing?" asked Jesse.
 "I am hunting for you. What are you three doing?"
 "We were up to Mother Thompson's."
 "Why did you go there?"
 "To get our fortunes told."
 "Jesse, have you gone crazy?"
 "No."
 "You surely have or you wouldn't be running around having your fortune told at this time."
 "What's the matter with this time?"
 "Did you ever hear of Dick Wright?"
 "The detective?"
 "Yes."
 "I have."
 "He's here."
 "What?"
 "In Burlington?"
 "Yes, in Burlington."
 "You must be mistaken."
 "Oh, no, I am not. I saw him—Jim Cummins saw him and recognized him."
 "Now, what can he be here for?"
 "There is but one thing in the world that can bring him here."
 "What?"
 "Us."
 "Well, if that's the case, boys, we'd better launch our bark and be going."
 "I rather fear, Jess, that you made a big mistake in firing that shot. You'll draw every policeman in the city this way, and they half suspect already that we are here."
 "Then let's get away."
 The four started down a hill toward the river, where lay a small steam launch, which the James Boys had constructed for their voyage down the great father of waters.
 This voyage was, by them, destined to be one of the most remarkable periods of their lives. It was to be attended with more adventures and hair-breadth escapes and wild deeds than had ever yet come to the lot of even these remarkable highwaymen.
 As they were hurrying down the hill, voices among the rocks and scattered buildings below them and on their right could be heard.
 "Look sharp now—look sharp, and don't let any one escape!" said a voice which they at once recognized as a police captain's.
 "Who are they, Captain Bunce?"
 "I don't know, but if that detective, Wright, is correct in his surmises, I have my suspicions."
 "They fired that shot."
 "No doubt."
 "May have hit some of our boys?"
 "Probably."
 A police captain and squad was not very congenial to the James Boys at this moment, and Frank and Jesse began to feel that it would be more comfortable somewhere else.
 "Boys," Jesse whispered.
 A subdued hush, and then some one answered:
 "We are listening."
 "We must scatter."

The command was given very low. No one heard it save his three companions.

Jesse had started off up a path leading toward town, when Frank sprang lightly to his side.

"Let's go together," he whispered.

"All right."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know; anywhere to keep out of the way of the police."

They climbed over a hill, ran across some open lots, and finally halted for a few moments to rest and reconnoitre in an old ruined and deserted building.

"Jesse, we had better give it up," said Frank, as he gasped for breath.

"Give what up?"

"This wild scheme of the Mississippi. We had better stick to our horses—to Siroc and Jim Malone—and let the river business go."

"No," said Jesse; "there is a power of gold in that boat. I am going to find it."

"But you may lose your neck in doing it."

"That is a risk we must run. But, Frank, how came you to draw our fire?"

"I thought you were police."

"It's a wonder I missed you."

"You didn't."

"Were you hit?"

"No. I just poked my hat around, and you sent a bullet right through it."

"I thought it impossible to miss such a mark."

"Hist!"

"Do you hear them?"

"Yes, don't you?"

"I do now."

Footsteps slowly and cautiously advancing up the hill could be heard.

"Frank."

"Yes."

"We must get out of this."

"I am willing."

There was not a moment to lose.

The bandit brothers slowly and cautiously crept through a window and dropped out on the opposite side of the house, just as two policemen pushed open the door and entered.

They left the house, wandered down along some fences and came to a dirty-looking street. Here they halted only a few moments to reconnoitre and then went on.

There were few people stirring, and as Jesse and Frank were both slightly disguised, they had but little fears of being discovered.

They wandered along the street, which was but dimly lighted, keeping a sharp lookout for police.

At last they heard heavy, quick feet coming behind them, and Jesse involuntarily clutched Frank's arm, and whispered:

"This way, Frank!"

They darted aside into an alley just as two policemen in blue coats and helmets, with long clubs in their hands, came hurrying by.

Jesse took the lead, and groping their way down the alley, the James Boys at last came to a large brick house.

It was evidently the residence of some person of wealth, and from the strains of music and laughter above they concluded that they were having a gay time.

Police were pressing them closely, and opening the rear gate, the James Boys entered it and stole quietly across the yard to the house.

The yard at the rear and the lawn in front were ornamented with many beautiful shade trees, rose bushes and vines, as well as flowering shrubs.

"Stay here, Frank," Jesse whispered.

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to see what's going on above."

"Don't, it's foolishly reckless," whispered Frank.

But Jesse was determined. He crept to the rose bush beneath the window and listened. He could hear many voices talking and laughing.

The language was all German, and he soon concluded that the Germans were having a high old carousal at this house on this night.

He hurried back to Frank.

"I have it now!"

"What is it, Jess?"

"A Dutch ball."

At this moment voices were heard coming around the house, and Jesse seized Frank's hand.

"Come, come," he whispered. "There is no time."

They hurried around the kitchen, an ell part of the house, and for several moments went blindly groping their way along.

At last Jesse's hand touched an outside cellar door.

He tried it and found it unlocked.

A lucky thought entered his mind at once, and raising the cellar door, he put it carefully back, and said:

"Frank, come down."

"In the cellar?"

"Yes."

"Are you mad?"

"No."

"You must be."

"Come on, unless you want to be captured out there. There isn't a moment to spare. Come on!"

Frank hesitated no longer, but crept quickly down into the cellar after his brother.

They groped their way down a pair of steps, closing the door after them.

A moment later they heard two persons above go by talking excitedly, but as both spoke German they, of course, could not understand what they said.

CHAPTER III.

ESCAPE TO THE BOAT.

Jesse James next turned the slide to his dark lantern, flashed it about over the cellar, and took in the surroundings. It was a large cellar, well stored with barrels of sour kraut, cabbages, potatoes, apples and beer, whisky and wine.

"Jesse, we've struck it rich," said Frank.

"So we have."

Jesse set the lantern on a box, and going to a beer barrel to which a faucet had been placed, and by which was a glass, drew off a glass and drank it down.

"Me next," said Frank.

"Look not on the wine when it is red," said Jesse.

"I won't. I will just drink it," said Frank.

Then Frank drew a glass of beer and drank it.

By looking about they found the place well stored with dried hams, beef, cheese and bread, in addition to apples and preserves.

"I have heard of worse places," said Jesse, helping himself to such food as came in his way.

In a few moments both he and Frank had dined heartily.

"Now we must begin to think about getting out of here," said Frank. "I wish I had some more beer."

"Never mind beer, you've got enough."

"Just another glass, Jess—it won't hurt."

"Yes, it will. Remember, our lives depend on our shrewdness now."

"Yes."

"Well, don't you touch another drop, I tell you."

"I won't."

At this moment a door could be heard opening from above.

"Frank!"

"Jess!"

The James Boys gazed at each other in dismay.

Creak, creak! footsteps could be heard. Some one was coming down into the cellar.

Jesse James pushed Frank into a corner and turned off the slide. Then he crept behind a barrel, and lay crouched down behind it to be secure from observation.

Soon the lower door of the cellar was pushed open, and there entered a large, corpulent German, with a candle in his hand.

Jesse slowly rose from behind a barrel as he advanced, and leveled a pistol at his head.

"Oh, mine Gott in Himmel!" gasped the Dutchman, dropping his candle.

It fell to the floor of the cellar, but was not extinguished. The little flame from it streamed upward, giving a faint, uncertain light, and giving to the two outlaws a more grim and terrible appearance than they in reality had.

Frank James, with a cocked pistol in his hand, crept over to his brother's side, and both glared furiously at the German.

"Speak or move and you are a dead man," said Jesse.

"No, no. I von'd!" gasped the German.

"Will you make any noise?"

"No, no. I von'd!"

"Don't open your mouth."

"I—I von'd."

"Silence, or I will shoot you right through the head!"

Jesse rose and went boldly up to the German, keeping his revolver still leveled at his head.

"Take off your coat."

"Mine goat?"

"Your coat. You very well know what I mean."

"Oh, yah!"

"Now the vest."

"Dese vas dem."

"Your pants."

"Ah, mine soul alife, vot vas all dot abond. mister?"

"Take off your pants."

"Vot for yon vant mit mine pants?"

"Off with them. I am going to make an exchange with you. Quick, for we have no time to lose."

"Ah, dese vas awful!"

"It will be worse if you don't obey," Jesse answered.

In a few moments he and the German had changed clothes.

Then Jesse took out a wig about the color of the German's hair, some false whiskers and paints, and proceeded to make up to look considerably like him.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Jacob Strauss," was the answer.

"Well, Jacob, do I look much like you?"

"Yah, von leetle bit."

"I flatter myself I do."

"Vot you do mit dat for?"

"Never mind, Jacob. I must tie you."

The German protested, but Jesse's revolver proved to be an excellent persuader, and he was silenced. Then he tied him hard and fast, and tied a handkerchief over his mouth.

Frank James had seen considerable of his brother's art in making up to look like other people, but he had never seen such a complete transformation as this was.

"Jesse—Jesse, this is remarkable!" he said.

"Now, Frank, I am going to play a bold part."

"What?"

"We want to get to the river, don't we?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am going upstairs to set the people wild."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tell them there is a robber in the cellar."

"I had better get out first."

"Oh, yes: go out the back way, and batten down the doors after you. I will lock everything from the inside," explained Jesse.

Frank realized that his brother was about to engage in some desperate, hazardous enterprise, and hurried out of the house.

Then Jesse locked the doors after him, put the German prisoner in the fore part of the cellar, and piled boxes and barrels all around him. Then he ran upstairs, and suddenly burst into the room where all the company was, his face red and his arms gesticulating.

"Oh, Yacob—Yacob, vot is it?" cried a woman, running to him.

"Robbers, t'iefs!"

"Where—where?"

"Und de cellar. De James Poys vas down dere!"

At sound of the James Boys, everybody began to yell. The music and dancing stopped, and some of the musicians leaped out of the windows and fled for their lives.

Jesse James, acting the part of the excited Dutchman to such an extent that he was not discovered, and believed to be the German himself, kept up his excited gesticulations and shouts, waving his hands and yelling in a most frantic manner.

At last he went out head first through the window, as there came a slight noise from below.

This was a signal for everybody to follow, and that party scattered far and wide in every direction.

Jesse's plan worked to perfection.

He could not have had it better had he desired.

The confusion and uproar drew the police from all parts of the city, and when some one said the James Boys were in the house, it was quickly surrounded and a search began for them.

The cellar doors were broken open, and a score of armed blue-coats hastened down into the cellar, where, to the amazement of all, they found Jacob Strauss a prisoner.

It was a long time before the puzzled police could understand what it meant.

In the meanwhile, the James Boys were working their way to their boat.

Jesse, having roused the police and sent them to the house, went at a run toward the river.

He saw a man across the street, and dimly as the street was lighted, recognized Frank.

Hurrying across toward him, he gave utterance to a low whistle of recognition, with which the James Boys always greeted each other.

Frank had started to run when he heard the signal, and came at once to a halt.

"Jesse," he whispered, "have you got through all right?"

"So far," was the answer.

"It's not over yet?"

"No, I suppose not."

"The whole city is roused, and by the time we get to our tug we'll have them all around us."

On every side could be heard the policeman's rattle.

Jesse James knew when he was in danger. This was a new field

of danger for him. If he had been on the back of his famous horse, and on the broad prairie, he could have defied all his enemies. But he was now in a new field, and one where he would be exposed to new danger.

The tug was a swift little vessel, and he had on board it some of his bravest, most determined men, and he thought once aboard it he could defy pursuit as if he was on the back of Siroc.

"We can't go direct to the river," Jesse whispered. "It looks as if they had called out the militia down there."

"Hadn't we better try to get away on a freight?"

"No."

"We'll be taken here."

At this moment men could be heard down on the street below them.

"Guard every avenue of escape!" said one.

"I don't think, sergeant, you need to guard the river," said another.

"I believe, captain, they will try to get away down the bank."

"No, if Jesse James is in the town he will not go near the river. I know the James Boys too well. They live in the saddle, and if they are here they will make a break for their horses."

"Maybe their horses are down under the river bank?" suggested the sergeant.

"No, sergeant, they are not," answered another officer. "I have made a careful search all around there, and I can't find any of them. They are not there."

"Now, I owe that man a debt of gratitude," said Jesse James to himself.

In a few moments it became evident that the police were all moving up toward them. Doubtless they heard the noise and confusion on the hill above, at the house of the German, and determined to go up there and see what was the cause.

"Frank," Jesse whispered.

"What, Jess?" Neither spoke loud enough to be heard across the street.

"We've got to pull back and get some place to hide until they have gone by."

"Go on—I will follow."

Then Jesse retreated backward, steadily backward for a few paces, until he came to a high stoop to a house that seemed to be deserted.

To dart in at the little iron gate and get a place under the stone stoop was but the work of a moment. There they crouched close up against the wall, but in the darkness effectually hidden from the police as they went by.

When all seemed to have gone up the street, the James Boys emerged and started again toward the river.

They had not gone far before they suddenly came upon an officer on duty.

"Halt!" he cried.

Both stopped.

"Wot yer want?" asked Jesse, in a hoarse, ruffianly manner.

"Where are ye goin'?"

"To our boat," Jesse promptly answered.

"Well, you are two suspicious looking fellows, so I will just take you in."

"Oli, now don't yer do it, cop. We're good boys."

"Yes, I will. Here, come along."

He stepped quickly up to the side of Jesse James, when that fellow, by a quick movement, dealt him a blow on the head below the ear, which felled him senseless to the ground.

"Frank, now is our time!" cried Jesse.

Away they ran like the wind down the street to the place where their boat was moored.

In a moment both sprang on the little deck.

"Are all here?" asked Jesse.

"Yes."

"Wood Hite and Bill Chadwell, too?"

"Yes."

"Have you steam up?"

Clell Miller, who was an engineer, managed the engine, and Ed. McMillan was pilot. Ed. had been a pilot on the Mississippi.

"Steam is up?"

"Yes," answered Miller.

"Pull out at once, and you can't get out a moment too soon, either, for we've roused every cop in the city."

"Haul in the lines," roared Clell Miller.

In a moment the little tug was under way. A man was seen running down to the river. The gleam of his badge told that he was a policeman.

"Ho! Stop that boat!" he cried.

But it continued to go on.

Bang! went a pistol, and Jesse James fell.

CHAPTER IV.

GOOSE ISLAND.

Frank James and Wood Hite both sprang to the side of the fallen chief.

"Is he killed—is he killed?" gasped Frank James, in a voice so earnest, pathetic and tender as to denote that although Frank James was an outlaw, he had the greatest love for his brother.

"I don't know," Wood Hite answered. "He is bleeding from the head."

Frank James, furious as an enraged bull, turned about and cried:

"Jim Cummins, bring me a Winchester rifle, and order Ed to put back ashore."

"What do you intend doing?" Jim Cummins asked.

"I intend to avenge him."

"Are you mad?"

"Yes."

"The shore is lined with police. See, they've got guns, too."

During the few moments that had elapsed the little vessel had been steaming away at an enormous speed.

By the dim lights of the city a number of people could be seen gathered along the banks of the river, and as Jim finished speaking a score of bright flashes burst from dark muzzles.

Bullets came whizzing through the air, skipping over the water, and one or two struck the craft, but no one was injured.

"He's all right," Wood Hite at this moment said.

"What, is Jesse alive?" asked Frank.

"Yes."

"But he was hit?"

"Only a scratch. The bullet merely grazed his head and brought a little blood."

Jesse was now sitting up. Looking about over the excited crew, he asked:

"What's the matter with you all?"

"We thought you dead, Jesse."

"I'm worth a dozen dead men, Frank; but I tell you that was close clipping, boys."

"A little sticking plaster, some salve, and you will be all right."

At this moment another volley of musketry from the shore was followed by the dropping of a score of bullets in the water but a few feet astern.

"Well, we're safe, I guess," said Jesse.

"Yes. Come in the cabin, Jesse, and let me fix you up," said Wood Hite.

"Ah, you are as good as a surgeon, Wood!"

"I am a surgeon."

"By the way, this is a fearful dark night," Jesse remarked, as he gazed about.

"It is."

Ed McMillan had the wheel in his hand, and Jesse said:

"Ed, can you see to steer pretty well?"

"Yes."

"It's very dark."

"That's true, but the headlight throws a light away over the water, and I can make out pretty well."

"You are all right then."

"Yes."

"Be careful that you don't run us on a sawyer and split us wide open."

"I will. I will run slow after we get beyond the guns," Ed answered.

Then Jesse and Wood went into the little cabin.

It was a small affair right back of the engine room. It was warm, dry and comfortable, however, and as it was now raining torrents without, was quite an agreeable place to be.

Jesse sank down on a couch, and Wood, with a basin of water, washed his face free of blood and placed a small patch of sticking plaster over Jesse's wound.

The lamp which burned upon the shelf flooded the comfortable little cabin with light.

Suddenly there came a terrible crash at the stern window, accompanied by a crash at the lamp, and the room was in darkness.

The distant report of a heavy rifle told the cause of the crash and darkness. A bullet had entered the window and struck the lamp.

As the deadly leaden messenger passed but a few inches from Jesse's head, that individual was not a little shocked at his second near proximity to death.

For a moment silence held both the outlaws dumb.

Then Jesse James spake:

"Wood Hite, that is no ordinary marksman," he said.

"No."

"That shot was aimed for us."

"Of course, or rather at the light."

"Did it come from shore?"

"I am not certain whether it came from shore, or from a boat that may be pursuing us."

"Pursuing us?"

"Yes."

"Who would dare?"

"Dick Wright."

"Oh, that detective. Say, Wood, you have heard of him, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"You know something about him?"

"I do."

"Is he a good rifle shot?"

"One of the finest in the world."

"Then perhaps he sent that bullet through our window."

"No doubt."

"Well, Wood, we must get rid of him. Such a fellow is dangerous."

"Yes."

Then they relapsed into silence, and the little propeller wheel kept churning and pounding the water at the stern, and sending the little vessel forward at an incredible speed.

The lamp was not relighted immediately.

In fact, the James Boys wanted just as little light as possible, for they had had enough of that rifleman's practice.

"Jesse, what do you mean by this wild expedition?" said Frank. Jesse laughed.

"You have put me off with laughs just as long as you can. I want to know what you are going to do. You promised you would tell us when you got afloat."

"Well, we are now afloat, are we not?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell you."

"Do."

Wood Hite, who like Frank James, had a burning curiosity to know the cause of their mad voyage, came close up to Jesse and listened.

"We have changed now," said Jesse.

"How changed?"

"From highwaymen to pirates."

"Pirates!"

"That's what I said—pirates. We will now be the terror of the Mississippi. We are going to capture a steamer."

"What steamer?"

"The old John J. Roe."

"That steamer is laid up. It doesn't run, does it?"

"It does, or will. She is to make another and perhaps a last trip down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and we are going to follow along slowly after her until she reaches some of the most lonely parts of the voyage, and then board her."

"Will it pay?"

"To board her?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"How much?"

"Nine millions."

"Nonsense!"

"No nonsense about it. I know of what I am speaking. There will be that much in gold and silver in the hold of the boat."

"Jesse, how did you learn all this?"

"Don't you remember when we did the Gainsville train robbery?"

"Yes."

"There was some mail robbing done too."

"I know it."

"Well, I managed, you know, to get hold of some papers and letters. There was a registered letter which had in some way been missent, and by it I learned that on the middle of this month the Steamer John J. Roe would take a certain amount of gold in her hull to New Orleans.

"Now, that part, of course, was designed to be kept a secret. The gold is to be transferred from the St. Louis savings vaults to the vaults at the Southern city, and they naturally intend that this transfer shall be just as secretly done as possible. Well, I have read again and again that the John J. Roe is being fitted up for a trip to New Orleans. I know what it means."

"If that was your intention, why not take all the boys? We'll need them."

"Of course we will."

"Then why not take them?"

"We will."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"But they are not here."

"No, but we will have them," said Jesse.

"Where?"

"Cole Younger, Jim, Bob and John, with Charley Ford and McDermit, the three Ward boys and Allen, will all join us at St. Louis."

"Then we'll have the full band."

"We will, and six new recruits, so that we will number thirty all told."

"That will be a good force."

"It will be one not to be despised."

At this moment the little propeller began to slow up, and Jesse James hurried on deck to know the cause.

Ed was ringing the signal bell for stopping.

When the deck was reached he found it intensely dark, and the rain still pouring in torrents.

The headlight of their boat showed that they were running in close to a thickly-wooded shore. There was a sort of an inlet or creek, into which the pilot was forcing the craft.

"Ed, what does this mean?" Jesse asked.

"We must land," said Ed.

"Why?"

"We are pursued, and have got to hide."

"What place are we at now?"

"Goose Island. We'll run in under the lee of the shore, and put out all lights. Then we'll wait here until our pursuer has given us up," said the pilot.

CHAPTER V.

DICK WRIGHT.

The James Boys never had a more determined, desperate sleuth hound on their trail than Dick Wright.

While Dick Wright was one of the youngest of Pinkerton's famous force of detectives, he was at the same time one of the boldest and most daring.

He was shrewd, too.

The oldest and most experienced detectives were glad to consult with Dick, for he could always put this and that together and draw a conclusion which might well be termed seeing to the middle of a mill-stone.

Dick had more at stake than the mere reward of capturing the James Boys for the reward. There was an act of justice in it, tinged strongly with vengeance.

His sister had, four years before the opening of our story, married an estimable young man named John W. Wicher.

Wicher was a detective belonging to the same force with Wright. He and Dick had always been the best of friends, and Dick fairly idolized his sister.

When Wicher went out to find the James Boys, and was captured and assassinated by them, and sent home dead to his wife, she seized the hand of her brother, and on her knees made Dick Wright promise that she should be avenged. Dick went out on his mission soon after the funeral, and we find him here in Burlington on this night.

Slowly and carefully, with all the cunning and patience of an Indian scout, he had followed slowly after the James Boys.

Here and there he gathered a clew, until he finally traced them to Burlington.

The chief of police knew the young detective well.

Dick had done considerable work in Burlington, and old Duffy was his warmest, best friend.

When he went to Capt. Duffy and told him he had the James Boys in Burlington beyond a doubt, the old fellow rubbed his head with his hand for a moment and said:

"Well, Dick, if anybody else was to tell me that I might not believe it; but if you say it's so, it's so; that's all there is to it."

"I know whereof I speak, Captain Duffy," said Dick. "Now, put out every man you can."

"I will."

"You entire force——"

"Shall be put on duty."

It was done, and the result we have seen.

Although the James Boys were close chased, and almost captured, they managed to escape through the extraordinary shrewdness and skill of Jesse and Frank.

"I will try one more shot. Bring me a good rifle," said the detective, as he stood on the wharf gazing away after the rapidly receding tug.

The light could be seen in the stern of the boat.

Two or three volleys had been fired, but the yacht kept steadily on her course.

"She is so far away you couldn't hit her," said the chief of police.

"If I had a rifle that would hold up, I would show you."

"Here is one," said a gentleman, who had been roused from sleep, and learning that the James Boys were in town, had seized a heavy Antwerp rifle which his brother had used hunting elephants in Africa, and came down to the beach.

"Is it long range?" asked Dick.

"Yes."

"Will it reach that boat?"

"It will."

"Then here goes!"

"The boat is a mile away, Dick," cried the chief of police, "and you can't touch it."

"If the rifle will hold up, I will knock out that light you see in the stern," said Dick.

"Can he?" asked a by-stander of another.

"I believe he can."

Dick brought the gun to his face, took a short but deliberate aim, and pulled the trigger.

There was a deafening report, and Dick was almost kicked over by the recoil of the gun.

"She went out!"

"She's hit!"

"Splendid work!"

"What a shot!"

These and a hundred more like expressions greeted Dick Wright as he struggled to his feet after firing at the boat.

"Do you see it now?" he asked.

"No."

He looked, and all was total darkness. It seemed as if the heavy ball had struck and sunk the little craft, but Dick knew much better than this.

He had knocked out the light, but the little craft was not sunk. Perhaps he had hit one of the occupants of the tug, but he could not hope for more.

"Captain Duffy, we must pursue them."

"All right, Dick. The police boat is at your command."

"Where?"

"At her moorings."

"Send for her."

A nimble young policeman set out on a run for the police boat.

The river police of Burlington were only twelve in number, and of these three had to be left on shore. So Dick had only nine men at his service.

They were all well armed with pistols, clubs, and a small four-pound gun was mounted in the forecastle, which they could handle to perfection.

"Now, right after them!" cried Dick Wright, as he sprang on the fore deck of the Mollie Stuart, as the police boat was called.

"All right, sir," answered the captain.

Then the captain gave orders to the engineer to crack on all steam possible, and away they flew.

"Good-by, Captain Duffy!" cried the young detective, waving his hat on parting at the chief of police, who stood on the wharf.

"Good-by, Dick, and God bless you!" cried the chief.

By this time the rain was pouring in torrents.

Dick had on a rubber suit, and, regardless of rain, stood in the bow of the boat looking ahead, straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of the fugitive tug.

The captain of the police boat came to his side.

"A very dark night, Mr. Wright."

"Very," Dick answered.

"It rains hard."

"Very hard."

"Do you see anything of the fugitive?"

"No."

"She is still ahead of us."

"Yes."

"I'll be glad if we overhaul her. How many men has she on board?"

"I do not know, captain, but I should suppose all the way from six to a dozen."

"And they will fight?"

"Most assuredly they will."

"Very well—my men are no cowards."

"I believe you."

Then a moment's silence ensued, during which Dick strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the boat before them.

But it was all intense darkness ahead and on either side of them.

"Do you see her yet?" asked the captain.

"No."

"I will get a night glass."

He brought it.

But even with this the fugitive could not be made out.

The lowering clouds which all day had hung low over the earth, now dropped their garnered fullness down in perfect torrents.

The night was too intensely dark for a glass to be of much service.

"Captain, does your pilot know the river?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Very well."

"Can you put on more speed?"

"Yes."

"Well, do so."

"Let me see. Isn't there danger of running by them?"

"I think not, unless there is some island where they might hide." The captain reflected a moment, and said: "There is no island until we get to Goose Island." "How far is it away?" "Twelve or fifteen miles below Burlington." "Inhabited?"

"Some fishermen live there," said the captain; "but it's a wild, heavily-wooded island."

"Put on full steam, we'll stop there."

"Why?"

"They are there."

"The James Boys?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"What would be more likely than that they would put in at the first available place?"

"That's so," the captain answered. "No doubt we shall run in on them there."

Then he went to the fireman and engineer and told them to put on all speed.

"It's a little dangerous, captain," said the engineer.

"Why?"

"The night's dark as Egypt, and we will like as not run onto a snag."

"Let her run, then! I'm going to get to Goose Island as soon as possible."

"Goin' to lay to at Goose Island?"

"Yes—they are there."

"Well, we soon will be."

Dick Wright still stood on the forward deck when the lights showed land ahead.

The pilot rang the bell to stop the engine, and turned the prow of the little craft aside, or it would have stuck in the mud.

After beating about some time, they finally ran in under a large tree, and the detective with six men, all with lanterns, sprang on shore and began searching the island. They had not gone far before Dick suddenly came to a halt.

"Do you see that?" he asked.

"What?" said one of the police.

"A footprint in the mud."

"Yes, it is."

"Let us search about until we find the owner of those feet."

They found the tracks leading off into the woods toward a creek.

They had almost reached the creek, when a volley rang out from the woods.

Three lanterns were smashed, and one man wounded in the arm.

The police retreated, and the detective, realizing the folly of attempting to fight alone, followed them. They had uncovered the enemy, and as the pilot knew where the creek was in which the James Boys' craft was concealed, the captain ordered the vessel around to the inlet. The police boat backed out and started around the island.

Three men went to work to load the swivel with ball and slugs to pour into the pirate craft the moment it was sighted.

It was a wild, exciting chase. The rain had ceased falling, but the wind blew a gale, and as Dick Wright stood on the fore part of the vessel the strong breeze played with his hair.

At last the creek was reached, just as a dark object darted out of it.

"There she goes!" roared Dick.

"Clear the way for the cannon!" cried the captain.

A moment later the small piece of artillery was trained on the retreating tug, and a heavy boom shook every timber in her.

There was a tremendous splash in the water near the stern of the retreating vessel, but no damage was done. All night long a game of hide and seek was carried on.

When day dawned the river was enveloped in a tremendous fog, and the police vessel was still chasing the piratical craft around the island.

Jesse James proved as good a naval officer as he did a cavalryman.

He allowed the police boat to come with pistol shot, and then suddenly unmasking the two small cannon, fired two solid iron balls right into it.

One shot entered the hull right at the water line, and the craft began to rapidly fill. It sank about a hundred yards from the island, while the piratical craft steamed away into the eternal fog, disappearing from the view of the sinking boat.

CHAPTER VI.

THE THREE MISERS ON MISERS' ISLAND.

For the present we must take leave of the James Boys and their leader, and introduce to the notice of the reader some new charac-

ters. Don't be impatient, dear reader, we will bring up the other characters quite soon enough, and our digression you will then see was only for the good of the story. In this wild yet true narrative, more strange than any fiction perhaps the reader has ever read, it is necessary to introduce all the *dramatis personæ* to the tale.

Down the Mississippi many, many miles below Goose Island, there is an island which goes by various names. At the present time it is uninhabited, and there are but few people who dream that it ever was inhabited.

It contains about three or four hundred acres, and is heavily wooded.

For the most part the island is low and flat, as most of the islands in the Mississippi are, but in the central part it is high and hilly, covered with heavy woods. In a sort of a valley between two long ridges, which run north and south nearly the full length of the island, there lived, at the time of which we write, three odd old men known to but few people in the outside world. They were three brothers named Denning, and the oldest was at least sixty, the others two and four years younger.

They had a small cleared spot, or farm, three or four horses, some cows, pigs and sheep, with a considerable amount of poultry, and had lived a sort of hermit life.

They were known as the three old misers of Misers' Island.

At the village on the Illinois side they had been frequently seen, and on account of their appearance were called by the boys, Greasy Tump, Filthy Jake and Horrid Zeke. These were odd names, and yet if you had seen them you would have thought them quite appropriate. Templeton Denning had been nick named Tump at some time in his life. At present writing Tump was fifty-six years old—grim, hideous-looking, and his clothing had the appearance of never having been washed. His jacket, a worn out sailor jacket, was slick with grease, which gave him the odd name of Greasy Tump. Filthy Jake was two years older than Tump, and had many of his characteristics. He was noted for his uncleanliness, which gave him his name. His dress was old, faded, worn and patched.

The largest and oldest of the trio, and he who seemed to be a sort of chief among them, was Horrid Zeke. To see Zeke Denning one would not ask why he came by such a name. He was the most horrible creature one ever saw in human form. His hair was long, iron gray, and his head usually covered by a fantastic cap or old broad-brimmed hat.

His cheek bones were high, his under jaw and chin massive, but covered with a heavy beard of a grizzled color.

As filth and dirt seemed to be the religion of the misers, Zeke was not one whit behind the others in filth, dirt and rags.

The three misers, it was said, frequently wore a suit of clothes until it had to be held together with wisps of straw and dead grass.

They were economical and miserly in everything.

Zeke, who was master, was a most rigid master.

Yet, living on that island as they did, they had amassed a fortune. How? the reader asks.

The island was well situated for wrecks.

Many a gallant Mississippi steamer had gone down on the sharp rocks along her shore, and one seldom ever sunk so deep but that the misers would contrive by some means to dive to it and secure the gold and treasure on board.

By this means the misers had hoarded away no inconsiderable amount of gold and treasure. This treasure, gold and jewels, they never disposed of, but buried it in a heap on a mound at the rear of their smoke house.

The night of the incidents related in our last chapter, the three miser brothers were sitting in their miserable hovel, dimly lighted by a small hollow dip candle. A few logs of driftwood were burning on the fire, and the three old men each sat in odd old-fashioned arm chair.

Zeke, the oldest, whose bulging eyes looked like the orbs of a boiled fish, was smoking an old, wheezy pipe.

The others were sitting on either side of him.

Jake was dozing and Tump nodding, while Zeke continued to puff away. Jake's snores kept time with the wheeze of Zeke's old pipe.

The storm howled loud without, and the rain beat fiercely against the old shanty.

At last Tump started up, and said:

"Zeke, did ye see them?"

"Who?" asked Zeke.

"The boys."

"Wot were on our island yesterday?"

"No!" yelled Zeke, starting up so violently that he dropped his cob pipe on the floor, and to his horror spilled the small amount of tobacco that was in it.

"They war here," said Tump.

Jake by this time was wide awake, and looked about in a timid sort of a way.

"Wot were they a-doin' here?" Jake ventured to ask.

"They've got an inklin' o' gold bein' buried on this 'ere island, an' I'm goin' ter kill 'em!"

"Don't think they know it," said Tump.

"Yer don't?"

"No, I don't."

"Why don't ye?"

"Didn't act that way. They jest acted ez though they didn't know anybody lived here at all, an' they had come fer a hunt."

"Humph!" answered Zeke, with some degree of contempt, "and I guess that's about all you know about it."

"It air about all that any un knows erbout it," said Tump.

"Wall now, look here, I've been boss o' this ranch for a long time, and I guess when I say do a thing it's been done, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"An' no disputin'—no kickin' erbout it, nother."

"No."

"Wall, wot I say'll be done now, won't it?"

"Perhaps."

"Wall, I mean wot I say."

"In course."

"Them two fellers wot war on this 'ere island hez got ter be put under ground."

"What?" cried Jake.

"Yer don't mean it?" gasped Tump.

"Yer kin bet yer life I do! I mean every word on it, an' I tell yer so; and now, I want no monkey business from either one o' ye."

With this metaphorical figure the old man began cleaning the locks of his weapons.

"Git up and be lookin' arter yer shootin' irons!"

"You ain't going to do it all ter-night, are ye?" asked Jake.

"No, git ready."

Jake and Tump rose, and took down each an ancient rifle and brace of pistols, as well as a dagger, and began rubbing them up.

CHAPTER VII.

TOM BRAGG'S DANGER.

Tom Bragg and Joe Tittle were both Missouri boys. They had frequently looked with longing eyes over the river at the mysterious island where rumor said some one lived, but as they had never seen any sign of civilization there they had come to the conclusion that rumor must be sadly mistaken.

They had seen thousands of wild ducks flying over that way, and one day with their fowling-pieces they stole away in a skiff for a good day's hunt on the island.

The result was meeting one of the ragamuffins on the island who ordered them to leave, threatening them with dire vengeance if they didn't go at once.

"I guess, Tom, we had better go," said Joe.

"Yes," Tom answered, though he was true grit, and as he considered that he was doing no harm, he felt some little hesitation about going.

They went.

"Tom," said Joe when they were under way.

"Well, Joe, don't you think he was mean?" asked Tom.

"Yes, with all that big island and thousands of ducks all about them, it was mean that they should begrudge us killing a few."

"It was."

"I don't know, though, it's their land, and they can forbid us hunting on it if they want to."

"Yes."

"I'll never bother them any more."

"Nor I."

"It's mean."

"It just is."

"I'll get father to buy the old island."

"That's a good idea."

Then they rowed on across the water, and at last Joe Tittle said:

"Tom, I believe that fellow would like to kill us."

"Yes—see him standing there on the bank."

"I bet they try it yet."

"Why should they?"

"Oh, I've heard it said that those people never allow anyone to come near them."

"I thought you hadn't heard anything about them."

"Oh, yes I had."

"But didn't know anything about them?"

"No. I had heard many wild and curious stories told about Misers' Island, and I believed all along that they were false until now. I really doubted if anybody lived there."

"So did I."

"Well, we are fully convinced that someone does live there."

And then both boys laughed heartily.

When they reached home they drew their skiff up on the shore,

and Tom and Joe separated, each to brood over what they termed their ill fortune in not being allowed to hunt on the island.

Next day in the afternoon Tom Bragg and an older brother named Will were down on the beach fishing.

"Did you bring your pistol, Tom?" asked Will.

"Yes."

"I can beat you shooting at a mark."

"No, you can't."

"Try me."

Tom was not to be backed out by such a banter.

"I will try you," he said, with a laugh.

"Fish don't bite well to-day," said Will Bragg, "so let's go ashore and shoot at a mark."

Tom had said nothing to his brother or to anyone about the event of the day before.

The storm and rain which had followed the day of the hunt had cleared away.

For an hour the two brothers fired at a mark and Tom came out the victor.

It was getting late in the evening.

"Tom, let's take in our trotline—the fish won't bite to-day," said Will.

"They may."

"Oh, it's no use to wait."

"Don't be in a hurry."

"We must get home to supper."

"Well, I will come back after supper," said Tom, "and look after the line."

"All right."

Will started home through the cotton woods, which grew in quite an abundance about the river, and Tom went to draw the boat further up the bank where there would be no danger of it being washed away.

While he was thus engaged he heard the measured dip of oars, and, looking up, saw three old men in an old, rotten-looking boat pulling up the river.

The reader must bear in mind that the three misers never came to the Missouri side of the river, always going over on the Illinois side for the transaction of such matters of business as they had to do, merely purchasing a few of the actual necessities of life.

They were therefore unknown on the Missouri side.

Tom Bragg gazed at them for a few moments, and then said:

"Why, one of those fellows is the old rascal who ordered us away from the island."

They pulled by within a cable's length of the shore, and Tom noticed that they gazed at him all the time.

"Well, if ever I saw three villains, it's those fellows," said Tom.

They passed on up the stream and paid no attention to him, but the youth felt that there was something wrong about them and kept his pistol in his hip pocket loaded.

After the evening chores had been completed, Tom remembered his trotline.

"Where are you going?" asked Will, as his brother started out of the house.

"To the boat."

"What for?"

"To look after the trotline."

"Well, go ahead."

"Come with me, Will."

"Oh, no."

"Who?"

"You can do it. I am going to the barn to saddle my horse."

"Going to the dance?"

"Yes."

It was now quite dark, but the moon shone through the fleecy gray clouds.

Tom was about to put away his pistol, when he happened to think of the three men, and he said:

"No, I'll keep it in my pocket."

Then he went out to the road which led toward the beach.

"I don't know why it is, but I believe those three men would like to kill me. Well, now, if they want a little circus with me they are welcome to it."

Tom Bragg was only a boy, but he had grit.

He was an excellent shot with the pistol, too, and there was danger in his eye when he was surrounded by enemies.

At last Tom reached his boat and pushed out to his trotline.

He did not see the three dark, shadowy-like forms creeping through the willows along the bank.

"Tump?" one whispered.

"Zeke."

"Is it him?"

"Yes."

"He, he, he!"

"We've got 'im!"

"Good as ours, right now in our hands."

Then the three hideous villains crouched down among the willows to watch the youth.

"He's pushing the boat out in the river, Zeke," said Jake.

"Yes, but he'll come back soon."

"He's only going out to look after his trotline," the third brother answered.

Tom Bragg pushed out in the river and went to his trot line.

Three catfish were found caught, and he drew them into his boat, where they lay flapping their great broad tails and gasping in agonized frenzy.

"This is a fine catch," said Tom, with a chuckle, as he pulled back to shore. "I've got a fine haul."

At this moment the tramp of horses' feet could be heard coming down the road.

It was Will Bragg on his way to the dance up the bottom.

"Zeke, who is it?" asked Jake.

"The other one."

"Crouch low; he'll see us."

They all crouched low and though night had come and the gathering darkness obscured objects in the deeper wood, the moon had risen and its rays fell on the thicket of willows and bulrushes in which the three misers were crouched.

Will Bragg saw them by the merest accident, and drew rein.

"Who are those?" he asked, his eyes almost starting from his head. "Who are they, and what are they doing here?"

The three men, crouching like so many wild beasts ready to spring, saw the young man dismount and tie up his horse.

"Zeke!"

"What, Tump?"

"We've got no time to spare."

"No."

"Not a moment. There comes someone to help him."

"I expect it's a brother."

"We'll have two now."

"As soon as he comes in reach we'll make a dash for him."

"All right."

Will Bragg hurriedly tied his horse, and then proceeded to watch the three men in the willows.

"I am unarmed," he thought. "Now, don't I wish I had Tom's pistol. I would make those three tramps get away from here just as soon as it was possible. But I haven't any kind of arms at all."

In the meanwhile Tom was pulling steadily into shore, little dreaming of any danger.

Will was watching the three tramps, as he supposed they were, wondering what their intentions were. Tom had said nothing about his adventure with the miser on Miser Island, and Will Bragg could not see why the three odd-looking men should have any sinister motive against his brother.

"Now, Tom Bragg was no coward, but when his boat was within a few feet of shore and he saw three great big men, with faces like demons, start up from the willows and make a dash at him he became alarmed and uttered a shout for help.

He leaped to the stern of his skiff and snatched his pistol from his pocket. Zeke and Tump sprang into the boat and Jake remained outside to push it off.

Will Bragg saw his brother's peril and ran toward him, but too late.

Tom Bragg leveled his pistol at Tump's head, but Zeke struck the weapon aside as Tom pulled the trigger and the bullet whistled harmlessly in the air. Tom was seized and held fast. Jake pushed off the boat and sprang in, seizing the oars, and pulled out into the stream.

Will saw his brother's danger and waded out to his waist but was unable to reach the boat.

It pushed off with his brother a captive. Bewildered, horrified and puzzled, Will Bragg went ashore, mounted his horse and returned home at a gallop.

News of the capture of Tom by three tramps was spread through the neighborhood and the wildest excitement prevailed. No more thought of the dance was given, Tom's danger engrossing every mind.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE BAYOU.

"It was a close squeeze," said Jesse James, as he saw the police boat go down near Goose Island. "By gosh, those were nice shots. They did the work."

"We are marksmen on water as well as land," chuckled Wood Hite.

"I believe you."

"We are done with them."

"For a short time," put in Ed McMillan, who had the wheel in his hand.

"For a short time—what do you mean?" cried Jesse.

"If you think Dick Wright, the detective, is going to give up so easily, you are very much mistaken. You don't know your man."

The steam tug kept on through the fog. Although it was now broad day, the fog still lay quite heavily on the water.

"Can't we go faster, Ed?" Jesse asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"The fog lies too thick, and, besides, we can't pass any large towns before night."

"The fog might conceal us."

"It may. We will try Keokuk."

"And Quincy, if possible. We want to get well down the river, where we can watch the operations of the John J. Roe, the steamer we are to lay for."

"All right, if we can make it, but the sun will probably dispel this fog, and then we'll be an object for all eyes."

Jesse walked forward and sat down on a stool.

Frank came to his side and said:

"Jess, I believe we had better give it up."

"Give what up?" demanded Jesse.

"This venture."

"You don't know me if you think I am going to back out."

Frank sighed.

"Jesse, if we could get rid of that fellow Dick Wright I would feel perfectly easy, but he is a sleuth hound. He hangs after us like a shadow, and he has more than common desire for reward."

"What?"

"Revenge."

"Revenge for what?"

"He is Wicher's brother-in-law."

"So it is to avenge that man we killed that he is hunting us down?"

"Yes."

"Well, he will find that we are no hares or innocent doves."

"Jesse, if we were on land, on our own horses, flying before an enemy, I should feel perfectly secure, but—but somehow—"

"Somehow you don't feel safe on water, eh, Frank?"

"That's it, Jesse."

"You are not a water dog."

"By no means."

"Well, the immense fortune on board that steamboat, the John J. Roe, in my opinion, will amply repay us for all the danger in the thing."

Ed McMillan gave the wheel into the hands of Wood Hite, and coming forward to Jesse said:

"Well, Jess, we are now running past Keokuk."

"Steer clear of the town."

"We'll do that."

"Can't we make Quincy?"

"No. The sun will drive away the fog before we can reach the town."

"Well, Ed, as you seem to have covered the whole matter in your calculations, what is your advice?"

"I think we had better lie in some bayou until night."

"Do you know of such a one?"

"Yes."

"Far?"

"About five miles from here."

"Can we reach it before this fog lifts?"

"I don't know; we can try."

"Do it then."

"I will."

"Oh, Ed!"

"Yes."

"Which side of the river is it on, the Missouri or Illinois?"

"Missouri."

"So much the better. Go ahead."

When Ed was gone back to his post, Jesse James yawned and said:

"Well, a whole day to be lost in a miserable bayou. But what can't be cured must be endured."

"Jesse, I don't believe we'll be very safe in that bayou," said Frank.

"Why?"

"Seems to me that forces on land as well as on water will be in search."

"Of course; but there is no hiding place in the middle of the river."

"An island."

"Well, Ed knows the river better than we do, and he has suggested the bayou."

"Yes."

Frank then relapsed into silence.

The engineer was told to crack on all steam, and Clell Miller did it.

The water boiled and hissed in the wake of the little craft as it darted with the speed of a race horse through the water.

Sometimes the fog would lift from before them for a few rods to settle down the next moment like a pall all about them.

They were running at a dangerous rate of speed, especially as the pilot could seldom see a cable's length ahead.

The loud whistle of a steamer was heard only a few rods ahead.

"Great guns!" cried Jesse, "We'll run into her."

"Abaft there!" sang out a voice from the darkness.

Ed McMillan had the little craft well in hand, and shot her out toward the larboard bow of the steamer.

The fog at this moment lifted a little, and they ran so close along the vessel as to almost graze it.

"Look out there, you fool!" roared the angry captain of the steamer. "Do you intend to stove in our larboard bows?"

"Keep cool, old man," Ed McMillan answered.

The vessel was a St. Louis and Keokuk packet, the Andrew Johnson by name, and one of the largest and most elegant steamers of the line.

For only a moment did the fog lift.

During that moment the pirate tug grazed the side of the Andrew Johnson, and went speeding away like the wind across the river.

Away she flew until dangerously near a sand bank, then Ed signaled to slacken speed.

"We're too late," he gasped, as he felt the peculiar rocking of the boat.

Steam was shut off altogether.

Ed saw the danger. He signaled to reverse the propeller, but all to no advantage.

"Too late!" he screamed.

"What's the matter?" Jesse asked.

"There was little need of asking, for at this moment the little bark ran high upon a sand bar.

"We're aground!" roared Ed.

"Confound your stupidity," cried Jesse.

"It wasn't his fault," put in Wood Hite.

"Can't he steer better than running ashore?"

"Not in this fog."

"Then he'd better quit."

"It was your fault," put in Wood Hite, who was very irritable.

"My fault!" shrieked Jesse James. "My fault! Why, you contemptible scoundrel, how can it be my fault?"

"He told you the danger of fast running in this fog."

Jesse James' hand was on his hip, and Wood Hite was not a moment behind him. He drew his revolver and cocked it.

"Hold on!" said Dick Little, laying his hand on Wood's shoulder.

"Don't do that."

Frank James, who grasped the situation in a moment, and knew that it would not do to quarrel among themselves, said, as he laid his hand on Jesse's arm:

"This won't do, Jess. It won't do. We must not quarrel among ourselves. We must not, I tell you."

"Well, I'll say no more about it," Jesse returned, for he saw how dangerous a quarrel would be. "Let it drop."

"It was nobody's fault," was Ed McMillan's answer. Ed was a peacemaker. Clell Miller came in also for his share in restoring harmony, and something like good feeling was restored, though Jesse James and Wood Hite were never good friends afterward. Both were seemingly friendly, and for a long time worked together in many a nefarious scheme, but were not friends by any means.

"Get out," said Jesse to his men. "Get out, all of you."

"In the water?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We must push her off."

Ed McMillan smiled his complacent peacemaking smile, and said:

"It's the only way, boys, to get her off."

"I wonder if he will get out in the water," said Wood Hite, looking at Jesse James.

We don't know whether Jesse James heard him or not, but one thing is quite sure, and that is that Jesse intended imposing no task on his men he was not willing to do himself.

He unbuckled his belt, took off his revolvers (something he seldom did), and stepped boldly out into the water, which came almost to his waist.

"Come on, here, come on," he cried. "We must not be backward about this. Come, all of you but the pilot and engineer, they must use the machinery to help us."

"Boys, it's the chief who is first," said Jim Cummins. "Who's going to hesitate now?"

"No one," answered Dick Little, and he plunged in.

All the others went quickly over the side, and the tug was soon afloat.

"All right now," said Ed McMillan. "Climb in."

"Hold her steady."

"Port helm," said Ed.

In a moment the bandits, or now river pirates, clambered in over the side.

By this time the sun had almost completely dispersed the fog.

"We can now run without danger," said Ed McMillan. "Go below and change your clothes for something dry, and Clell and I will put you in the snuggest little bayou you ever saw."

Jesse led the boys to the cabin, where they all found dry suits of clothes and were soon dressed and comfortable.

The cabin presented a war-like scene. The walls were lined with rifles, muskets, pistols and cutlasses. Jesse James gazed about on the array of weapons, and, with a smile, said:

"This truly has all the appearance of a pirate craft."

"It has," said Jim Cummins.

"And such we will make it. I have taught the world what it is to hold up a train, now what will they think when we teach them what it is to hold up a steamboat?"

When they had all dressed in dry clothes they went out on deck. Quite a change had come over the scene.

They were running into the mouth of a creek with a steep, muddy bank on either side covered with a dense growth of overhanging trees.

"We are running into the bayou," said Ed, "and we'll soon be safe. Ha, ha, ha! We'll soon be safe."

The little vessel crept up a few hundred paces, and then turning about lay close up against the bank with her bow toward the river.

"We are in the bayou, and I don't think there is much danger of their discovering us here," said Ed, with a smile.

CHAPTER IX.

A STORM.

As the banditti had been awake all night, exposed to danger, tempest and hardships, Jesse thought it best for all to get what sleep they could during the day.

"Jim, get breakfast for us as soon as you can," said Jesse.

"Jim Cummins was the cook."

"We'll have it soon," said Jim.

He had a roaring fire in the cook stove, and in an incredibly short time had steak broiled and coffee made.

This, with bread and cold potatoes, constituted their breakfast. In a few moments the banditti were gathered about the rude table, and sat down to the meal.

Jesse poured the coffee, and did the honors as chief there, as he did with the band.

"Now, boys, we must post a sentry on either side of the bayou, and then lie down to sleep," said Jesse.

In a few moments the guards chosen had taken their places, and the others were buried in sleep.

Hours rolled by.

The heavens, so clear and bright during the morning, became overcast toward noon, and an hour later heavy clouds gathered in the west, and thunder sounded the long roll for the conflict in the heavens.

The bandits slept on. The storm burst, and the guards were driven in to the vessel.

Dark clouds seemed to lower over the earth.

The guards awoke two more to take their places, and joined their companions in sleep.

The day wore on and night was approaching, when Bill Chadwell, whose turn it was to be on guard, suddenly discovered by a vivid flash of lightning a large body of men coming down from the north. They were armed, and carried their guns secured under their arms to keep them dry.

"Wake up—wake up!" cried Bill, shaking Jesse.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"They are coming!"

"Who?"

"The enemy, see!"

"Up, boys. Up, everybody."

Such a scrambling to their feet as there was.

"Down below for guns."

In a moment every bandit had a Winchester rifle. A volley rang out from the woods, and the bullets flew like hail over the boat.

The James Boys returned the fire, and Clell Miller began firing up.

"How soon can you have steam up?" Jesse James asked of Clell Miller.

"In five minutes."

"Hurry!"

"I will. Do you think the force large?"

"Five hundred if a man. Don't you hear that roar of guns? They've got behind trees and it's too dark to hit them."

"Yes; but they over-shot us," said Clell Miller.

At this moment Bill Chadwell came up.

"Jesse," he said, "I recognized Dick Wright among them."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"Then we have him to thank for this."

"We have."

"Never mind, we'll soon have steam up, and then we'll show them a pair of clean heels."

"Let's use the cannon."

"Load both to the muzzle with buckshot," said Jesse.

The work was soon accomplished.

By this time the fireman had steam up, and the little propeller began pounding away at the water.

The boat shovved out and the cables were shipped.

"Now, let them have it!" cried Jesse.

Boom!

Boom!

Two reports shook the air, and the little vessel trembled to its very center from the recoil. Showers of buckshot flew among the trees, shattering the bark and scattering the small branches and leaves far and wide.

A fearful silence followed. Not a shot was fired for a full three minutes, then it seemed as if all the woods above them was in a terrible blaze.

The little boat ran head in to the wood, backed out, and struck on the other side like a stunned thing of life. But at last, amid a tremendous shower of bullets, it reached the outlet and glided out into the river.

CHAPTER X.

TAKING A TOWN.

Though two police boats, heavily armed, were waiting to capture the Black Cloud, as Jesse had named his piratical craft, it ran the blockade with only a piece knocked off the top cabin, just before the pilot house, by a four-pound cannon-ball.

Jesse was an excellent commander.

He had both cannon loaded before he got outside the bayou, each with a ball and buckshot on top.

Dark as it was the two police boats could be seen by the flash of their guns.

"Give each one of them a load," cried Jesse James, and consequently a cannon was aimed at each of the police boats.

Two tremendous reports again shook the little vessel and the shouts and cries of anguish from the police boats told that they had not missed their marks.

"Pretty well done!" cried Jesse. "Now, Clell, crack on all steam."

Away they flew down the river.

Although the night was quite dark and the rain pouring in torrents, there was no fog on this night, and objects could be seen much further than on the night before.

A strong headlight with a powerful reflector at the back of it was placed at the bow, which enabled the pilot, who was naturally a very keen-sighted fellow, to see far ahead.

The propeller was one of the swiftest that ever plowed the great father of waters. It rolled up the waves before it as if it would drive the water out of the river banks.

They passed Quincy and could plainly see the lights along the shore.

Two or three steamers went up the river, the Black Cloud giving them a wide berth.

"Where are you going to land to-night, Clell?" asked Jesse.

"I don't know. Shall I go to Hannibal?"

"No."

"Why?"

"We are not ready yet."

"Well, there is the Misers' Island."

"Who lives there?"

"Some say no one. Some say three old misers."

"Well, suppose we put in there."

"All right."

"How far are we away?"

"We'll be there in an hour."

"Then we'll determine whether there is anyone there or not."

The vessel continued its way down the great father of waters, though at a slower rate of speed, and at the end of an hour she was run up close under the lee of a steep bank.

"Here we are," said Ed McMillan.

"At Misers' Island?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now let me see what we'll do," said Jesse, reflecting. "I suppose we had as well leave a part here, and the others explore the island."

"Good idea."

"Come, Frank, Dick, Jim and Bill, we will take in the island and see all there is to be seen."

"All right."

They left the boat and went up the bank. The rain had ceased falling and the sky was almost clear.

"Jesse, how long are we going to lay here?" asked Bill.

"I don't know. If we are not discovered I propose to stay here until we get some news from the other boys and the steamer John J. Roe."

"Yes—but—hello! What's that?"

"People marching. Soldiers," answered Jesse. "Whist!"

All became still, and Jesse crept along a path until he could see a score or more of men all armed with guns.

Where were they going?

Of course the reader knows it was the friends and relatives of Tom Bragg, bent on the rescue of the lad from the clutches of the misers, who no doubt intended killing him.

The James Boys followed after the armed posse filled with wonder.

At last there loomed up around a hill a miserable looking log house. The posse made directly for it.

A flash and a report comes from it.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Shots now fly thick and fast.

"They are fighting over there," said Frank James to his brother.

"Yes; but it is none of our funeral."

The fight went on. They saw three miserable looking specimens of humanity driven from the wretched house to the woods. A boy was rescued, and the house set on fire.

Jesse James sent one of his men back to the Black Cloud with the news, and with the others determined to fathom the mystery.

The posse of men picked up two of their number who had either been killed or badly wounded and hurried away to their boats, crossing over to the Missouri side.

"Jesse, what does it mean?" Frank asked.

"I don't know."

"Let us find out."

"I am going to."

"Jesse, there is one of the three men who escaped from the house," Bill Chadwell said.

"Where?"

"Over among the bushes."

"Capture him."

"All right."

Bill glided away into the darkness and was gone but a few moments when he returned with one of the most disgusting looking people Jesse James had ever seen.

His clothes were patched and fearfully dirty.

"Who are you?" Jesse asked.

"Jake Denning."

"Who were those fellows who just now burned your house?"

"Some fellers from Swampville."

"Where is Swampville?"

"Three miles down the river. It air a little town."

"Who are the other two men who were with you in the house?"

"My brothers, Tump and Zeke."

"Rather odd names."

"Yes."

"Now tell me what made the people from Swampville come and burn your house?"

Jake seemed puzzled for some moments, but collecting himself, answered:

"It all came about a quarrel about some o' them youngsters a-huntin' on our island."

"You object to people hunting on your island?"

"We do."

"And they persisted?"

"Yes."

"And that brought about the quarrel?"

"It did."

"Well, you fellows got the worst of it."

"We did, but two av 'em'll never come back to do it ag'in."

A new thought at this moment entered Jesse's fertile brain, and he asked:

"Is Swampville a large town?"

"No; not more'n a hundred houses in it."

"Now, wouldn't you like to have revenge?"

"Waal, ye jist bet we would."

"I'll tell you how you can."

"How?"

"Go and bring your brothers here and we'll go and burn their town while they sleep."

"Yes, an' ent their throats!" hissed Jake.

"Were either of you wounded in the fight?"

"I got er scratch."

"And the others?"

"Ain't seed 'em."

"Now, go quick, find your brothers and bring them here, and we will all go together."

"We ain't ernuff."

"But I've got more men down at the boat."

"Boat—yer got a boat?"

"Yes; it's a steam tug, and we are waiting for you. We want a chance to plunder the town."

The miser's heart rankled at the loss of his house, and the prospect of having revenge on the destroyers filled him with delight.

As soon as he was gone, Frank James asked:

"Jesse, what do you intend doing?"

"Intend making a big strike."

"What?"

"Take a town."

"Do you mean to take Swampville?"

"I do. Pirates of old used to storm towns and sack them, why not us?"

"But pirates of old had very different obstacles to contend with from what we have. They had no thickly settled country all about them, as we have."

"We can ruin Swampville and be far away before morning."

In a few moments they saw Jake returning with his two villainous-looking brothers.

All three were highly elated at the prospect of so soon being even with the men who had destroyed their home.

Jesse laid his plan before them, and they eagerly joined the expedition, especially as they were promised a share in the spoils.

"Have you all got arms?"

"We've got our guns and pistols," said Zeke.

"Are you cowards?"

"No."

"Then come."

Zeke managed to whisper to his brother Tump:

"Guess, Tump, they don't know nuthin' at all erbout it, do they?"

"The buried treasure?"

"Umph—umph!"

"No."

"It's all right."

"Yer bet."

"We'll add to it."

"Yes, an' git even wi' 'em for burning our house. Ah, how I hate 'em. Ah, how I want to kill 'em."

"So do I."

"We'll do it, too."

"Yer bet."

The boat was reached and all embarked on the Black Cloud. Jesse went to the pilot and said:

"Ed, do you know where the town of Swampville is?"

"Yes."

"How far is it?"

"Three or four miles."

"Take us there at once."

"What are you going to do, Jess?"

"Take the town."

Laughing at the idea, Ed answered:

"Well, Jess, it'll pay ye."

"Will it?"

"Yes."

"Get under way at once, and don't let a minute escape idle till we are before the town."

In a few moments the Black Cloud was steaming down the "Is there gold there?"

"I'll bet there's more money there than in lots o' big towns." river at a tremendous rate of speed, and soon left Misers' Island out of sight.

Jesse had his crew and the three recruits all busy getting ready for the coming engagement. The cannons were changed to the bows.

They, being mounted on short carriages, could be easily brought around. They are each loaded with an iron ball, and then guns, revolvers and cutlasses brought up and distributed.

"It must be quick work," said Jesse. "We'll give them a broadside, and then go in for all you are worth."

The James Boys now made up a force that was not to be disposed by any means. Jesse was in the prow when the town was sighted.

It was a little place, carefully nestled away between the hills, and surrounded by trees and bushes.

"There it is," he said; "get the guns ready."

"They are ready," Wood Hite answered, grimly.

"Aim one at the row of houses on the left, and one at the row of houses on the right."

It was done. The town was dark.

Only one light shone, and that was a lantern in a livery stable. The engine was almost stopped, and they glided close up to the shore.

Jesse had for each man a ball of cotton twine saturated in turpentine. With these the deadly work of destruction was to be done.

"Stand ready!"

"All ready!"

"Wait till the bow touches. Remember, only two men to remain on board. The others follow. The man who shirks shoot him dead. We can't have any cowards here now."

"Aye, aye!"

The boat glided slowly up, and as the bow touched the bank, Jesse cried: "Fire!"

Bill Chadwell and Jim Cummins each had a red hot iron, which they thrust into the touch-holes.

Boom!

Boom!

Two terrific reports rang out. It seemed as if winged destruction flew among those houses.

The rattling and crashing of the heavy cannon-balls were something terrible to hear.

"Charge!" roared Jesse James.

With sword in one hand and revolver in the other, he leaped on shore and ran like a madman up the street.

The scene that followed beggars description, but it was taking a town with all the horror the term implies.

CHAPTER XI.

ETHEL AND DICK.

Dick Wright led the posse against the James Boys, as they lay concealed in Bayou Menard on the Mississippi.

They escaped Dick, as we have seen, but he did not despair.

He returned to Keokuk, and at an early hour next morning, with John Flynn, Joe Taylor and Al Bright, four daring detectives, set out in a steam tug to run down the James Boys.

They heard nothing of them. At noon they came upon the ruins of what had the day before been the beautiful village of Swampville. It was now all smoking and smoldering ruins.

"What does this mean?" said Dick.

"Suppose we go ashore and see," suggested John Flynn.

Ashore they went.

They found the woods and banks covered with distressed, homeless people.

One old man, who stood bare-headed and infirm, with feeble hands leaning on his staff, was approached by Dick.

"What does this mean?" asked Dick.

"Gone—all gone."

"What's gone?"

"House."

"Who did it?"

"Don't know. Some say misers, some say not. All gone—all gone."

"You can't get anything from him," said Joe Taylor. "Try someone else."

Dick next approached a young man whose arm was in a sling and whose head was bandaged very much as if he had been in a fight.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "What has caused all this ruin?"

"Well, stranger, that is a question that puzzles all of us. We can't any of us tell what has caused this trouble. It seems that last night, while we were all asleep some men landed and set the town' on fire, and shot our people as they ran. They robbed the stores, burned and plundered every house and left."

"Where did they go?"

"That, too, is as much a mystery as their appearance here, stranger. We don't know anything of what became of them."

"Have you no suspicions?"

"Yes."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"The misers on Misers' Island. Because two boys, Tom Bragg and Joe Tittle, went on their island to hunt for ducks, they not only drove them away from the island, but they came over just at dark, seized Tom Bragg, carried him over to their island, and were actually going to put him to death. We gathered up a party, went over, rescued him, and burned down their house. Now, we had just got back, and all got snugly in bed and asleep when these fiends poured in on us."

Dick asked himself if the James Boys might not have had something to do with it.

"How many of the misers were there?"

"Three. But they had reinforcements."

"Do you know what kind of boats they came in?"

"No."

"Did anyone see a steam launch or tug?"

"No. Everybody was so excited and bewildered that they saw nothing but a lot of demons flying about from place to place, setting houses on fire and shooting down people."

"What reason have you for thinking the misers did it?"

"They were seen."

"The misers?"

"Yes."

"By some of your people?"

"A score or more recognized them."

Dick then proposed that they go to the misers' island and search it.

They did so, but failed to find anyone. They then returned to the ruins of what had once been Swampville, and made a careful search for some other evidences of the misers, but could find none.

As Dick Wright and John Flynn were walking along the hillside, Dick said:

"John, I believe the James Boys were in this."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It is so much like their diabolical work."

"What is that, Dick? It looks as if something had plowed up the ground."

"It looks like a cannon-ball had struck the ground."

Dick turned about and looked back at the river, as if to get the range from whence the shot had been fired.

"John, let's follow it up."

"What could it lead to?"

"A clew."

They had not gone far before they found a small cannon-ball, such as is used by swivels, lying half embedded in the ground.

"Do you see that, John?" cried Dick.

"Yes; it's a small cannon shot."

"That confirms me."

"In what?"

"That the James Boys did it."

"I don't see how it can—"

"You don't. They have two pieces of cannon on their vessel, and they did it. Now, we must get to Hannibal as soon as it is possible for us to get there."

They went to their boat, called aboard all the others, and in a few moments were steaming to Hannibal. Dick Wright went ashore there, and, hunting up the chief of police, made inquiry for the pirate tug.

She had not been seen.

"Do you think she could have passed since four o'clock this morning without being seen?"

"Hardly; yet it's possible."

He telegraphed to Alton and St. Louis below, and to Quincy and Keokuk above, and to towns along the Illinois and Missouri rivers to watch for the tug, giving a complete description of the same.

"Well, what are you going to do now?" John Flynn and Joe Taylor asked.

"This will be our headquarters for a while. We must lay to here until we hear something of them."

Taylor and Flynn went to the tug, and Dick went to a hotel where he registered, and engaging a room went to bed.

He had lost so much sleep that exhausted nature demanded repose, and he was soon sound asleep.

He did not wake until next morning. Dick had assumed a slight disguise, which would deceive almost anyone. He went down to breakfast a little late, and found but two persons in the dining room.

They were a large man with fierce black whiskers and hair, and a young girl not over eighteen years of age. Though both sat at the same table it was quite apparent that they were strangers.

The girl had beautiful golden hair and blue eyes. She was very pretty, and Dick could not help admiring her, and gave her more attention than the heavily bearded man at the table.

But there was something strange about the man. His dark, steel-gray eyes seemed to pierce the detective like a knife, and he once or twice asked himself if he had seen him before.

The young lady, gazing for a moment first at one stranger and then on the other, at last turned to Dick and said:

"I beg pardon, sir, but can you tell me when the steamer John J. Roe will be ready to sail south?"

Her voice was sweet as rippling music, and thrilled Dick. It almost made him mad because he was not posted as to the John J. Roe.

"I do not know to a certainty, but I will ascertain for you during the forenoon."

"Thank you, sir. You are very kind."

"Are you going on the John J. Roe?" asked the heavily bearded man.

There was something in his voice which startled Dick Wright. He could not determine, however, what it was.

"Yes, sir."

"She'll not leave her pier for a week."

"That long?"

"That's the news on the levee," answered the black-bearded man. She turned her eyes appealingly to Dick, who answered:

"I will ascertain to a certainty for you."

"Please do."

"You'll find it as I have stated," said the black-whiskered man.

"I—I—don't doubt it," the young girl answered, and Dick thought he observed a shudder pass over her as she spoke.

"The John J. Roe is an old tub that ought never again be put on the river," said the big man with black whiskers.

"How long has she been idle?"

"For years. In 1861 the John J. Roe was one of the best steamboats on the lower Mississippi, but now she is a tub that has been abandoned. The idea of fitting her up for another voyage is nonsense," said the man with the black whiskers.

Dick ventured no answer. The young girl, who seemed to shun the man with the black beard, asked Dick:

"Are you going down the river?"

"For a short distance."

"Then you will not go on the John J. Roe?"

"No."

She looked as if she were a little bit disappointed, and Dick felt sorry that he was not going on the same steamer with the pretty girl.

As she rose and left the dining room he followed close at her side, and in the hall asked:

"What name, please, shall I call on to give my information concerning the boat?"

"Ethel Elliott."

"Thank you. I will obtain the information as soon as I possibly can, and will give it to you."

"Oh, thank you, you are very kind," said Ethel.

"Do you know him?" asked Dick.

"The man at the table?"

Dick nodded.

"No, sir."

"How long have you been at this hotel?"

"A week."

"Did you ever see that man before?"

"No, sir."

"I beg your pardon for annoying you with these questions, but I have an object in them which I may some time be able to explain. I hope I may soon see you again."

With a bow he was gone, and Ethel went to her room with strange impressions about the two men she had met at breakfast. One she detested, the other she liked.

Who were they? she asked herself, for she had not learned the name of either.

CHAPTER XII.

THE JOHN J. ROE.

"Are you going to the steamer?"

These were the words which greeted Dick Wright on reaching the pavement.

He looked at the speaker, and was not a little surprised to discover that it was the man with black whiskers whom he had seen at the table.

"Yes."

"Thought I'd go along."

"Are you going down the river?"

"Yes."

"On the John J. Roe?"

"Certainly."

"Why do you risk your life on a boat that you think ought to be condemned?"

The man with the black whiskers chuckled for a few moments, and then said:

"I guess they'll get her fixed up so there will be no danger of the thing going down."

"Do you live in Hannibal?"

"No."

"In St. Louis?"

"No."

"Where?"

"In Memphis."

"Then you are going to Memphis?"

"Yes. Where are you going?"

After a moment's hesitation, Dick said:

"I am going to St. Louis."

"St. Louis? When?"

"In a few days."

"You are waiting here on some business?"

"Yes, I am waiting here on some business," Dick answered.

"Well, you seemed to be pleased with the appearance of the young lady you met at the table."

"Do you know her?"

"No."

"Ever see her before this morning?"

"Never."

Then a few moments' silence ensued, to be broken by the man with the black whiskers asking:

"Have you read the Hannibal Clipper of this morning?"

"No."

"Here it is. Do you see that?"

He pointed to an item about the destruction of Swampville by a party of unknown fiends.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

"It was simply fiendish."

"Of course it was."

"Has anything been done to capture the perpetrators of such a heinous crime?"

"Oh, yes."

"What?"

"Sheriff and posse scour the country."

"Have they any clew?"

"No."

Then the man with black whiskers after chuckling a few moments to himself turned to Dick and asked:

"Who did you say did it?"

"I don't know."

"But you must have an idea."

"The people say those misers did it."

The eyes of the man with the black whiskers sparkled at the newly gained information.

"They do?" he asked. "Who says they say it?"

Dick was trapped. Despite all his shrewdness he had allowed the man with black whiskers to lead him into a trap.

He glanced at the paper, but it offered him no aid. It said not a word about the suspicion he had expressed.

"I heard that such was the opinion of the people."

"I thought you had not heard of it at all."

"Yes, I did. I had heard of it, but it was not in my mind."

Then Dick felt like kicking himself for having allowed himself to be drawn into this discussion at all.

It is the province of a detective to interrogate and not be interrogated.

Now, Dick had allowed the stranger with black whiskers to get the start of him, and how was he to get even with him?

"Do you really think it was the misers?" asked he of the black whiskers.

"I don't know. What do you think?" Dick asked, determined to change matters and become himself the interrogator.

"I don't know. Someone hinted it was the James Boys."

"Are they here?"

"Where?"

"On the river."

"I don't know."

"Do people think so?"

"I don't know."

"They must think so if they think they did it."

"Oh, not necessarily."

"Why not necessarily?"

Dick had taken the subject in hand and was now handling it with vigor, plying the man with the black whiskers with questions at a rate that he found it inconvenient to answer.

The black-whiskered man gave Dick Wright a glance of fire, bit his lip, and said:

"It's impossible to answer all your questions."

"You really think it was the James Boys yourself, don't you?" said Dick.

"I don't know."

"What is your name?"

"John Gault."

"Where do you live, Mr. Gault?"

"In Missouri."

"In St. Louis?"

"Yes."

"What is your business?"

"I am a tanner."

"A tanner—what street?"

"I am out of business now."

"Looking for a job here, are you?"

"Yes, I was."

"Well, I guess you found it."

"Oh, no. I have given up finding it, and now I am away to Memphis. What is your name?"

"John White."

"Where is your home, Mr. White?"

"Chicago."

"What's your line?"

"Commercial traveler," said Dick.

Dick never felt any hesitation in telling an absolute falsehood when it became positively necessary to do so.

He knew the man with black whiskers was trying to deceive him, and felt quite sure that the man had his suspicions aroused.

"Well, I don't know, Mr. White, as we need stay here longer," said the man calling himself Gault.

With this they parted, Dick going in the direction of the steamer he wished to inquire about.

Dick went from the deck of the John J. Roe, after having secured the desired information for Ethel Elliott, and walked across the levee to the street.

The distance was not great, but the levee on the water front at Hannibal, Missouri, is very steep.

He was passing a saloon, when someone touched his arm.

Looking about, he saw that it was his companion, Mr. Gault.

"Won't you come in?" he asked.

"Where?"

"Have a smile," and Gault nodded significantly at the door of the saloon.

"No, thank you."

"What, never irrigate?"

"No."

"Fumigate, don't you?"

"What's that?"

"Smoke."

"Sometimes."

"Come in and fumigate."

"Confound the scoundrel, can I never get rid of him?" the detective asked himself.

But there was no excuse or help for it, and he went into the saloon with him and took a cigar.

"Sit down and let's have a talk," said Gault.

"Thank you—you must excuse me, because I am very busy. I have some important letters to write."

"Oh, certainly, but I'll see you again."

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Good-day."

"Good-day."

The detective was gone but a moment when an expression of satisfaction beamed on the face of the man calling himself Gault, and he said:

"I have got him. Ha, ha, ha! I have got him sure, and no mistake. Oh, Dick Wright, you are shrewd, but Jesse James can outwit you."

Gault was none other than Jesse James in disguise.

Dick Wright reached the hotel and asked to see Miss Elliott. She asked that he be shown to her room, and as soon as he entered asked:

"When does the John J. Roe sail?"

"In one week," he answered.

"Then that man was right."

"He was."

"Oh! I dislike him, I don't know why I am afraid of him."

Dick Wright did not have it in his heart to tell her that the man whom she feared was to be one of her fellow passengers on the John J. Roe, so he deftly changed the conversation to other topics, and shortly afterward took his leave.

CHAPTER XIII.

JESSE AS A PASSENGER.

All Hannibal slept that night as calmly and unconcernedly as if no danger threatened any human being in all the country.

There was no unusual stir next morning.

Dick Wright and his little band of faithful detectives were on board their tug.

It was late that day before Dick Wright and John Flynn awoke from their sleep.

"Where are you going, Dick?" John asked as the detective began washing himself.

"I am going ashore," was the answer.

"Going ashore?"

"Yes."

"You'll be sure to be seen by some of the James Boys."

"Well, perhaps I will, but, John, I want you to run down the river and search every creek and bayou that leads into the Mississippi River, so that we may be sure the James Boys' tug is not lurking anywhere in the vicinity of this place."

"All right."

"Now, John, if you find the pirate you may be sure that she will fight."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Hadn't you better appeal to the chief of police and get a few extra hands?"

"Yes, I will."

"You can exercise my authority in the matter, John."

"I will."

"Now, I'm going ashore and your leaving the city may remove any suspicion of me."

The carpenters were busy at work on the steamboat and every arrangement was being made to get the vessel away as soon as possible.

Painters were painting, glaziers were putting in glass, and the constant ring of hammers and rasping of saws filled the air with a terrible din.

But Dick was not destined to leave his tug unnoticed. He had scarcely reached the pavement of the river front street before he was accosted by no less a person than Mr. Gault.

"Hello, White," he said.

"Hello, Gault," said Dick.

"Snug craft that."

"Will be when it's finished," answered Dick, pretending that he thought the fellow had reference to the John J. Roe.

"Oh, not the steamboat that is building."

"What then?"

"The boat—the tug you just left."

Dick knew now that he had been discovered and that further attempt at concealment was useless.

"Yes—yes, it's a fair craft."

"Where were you last night?"

"I went out with a friend."

"Have a good time?"

"Fair."

Dick walked on to the hotel, saying as he did so:

"Confound that fellow Gault! He is the height of impertinence! What can I do to get rid of him?"

He went straight to the hotel, and was going to his room, when he met Ethel in the hallway.

"Oh, Mr. White, I am so glad to see you. I missed you so much last night."

"Did you?"

Somehow it was very pleasant to be missed by such a sweet little creature as she was.

"Oh, yes; and I had such a terrible dream about you."

"Did you?"

"Yes, I—I thought that you were among a lot of terrible men, who were going to murder you."

He smiled when he thought how near the dream had come to being a terrible reality with him. But he had no intention of shocking her by telling anything about his dangers, and with a careless laugh he said:

"Oh, it was nothing at all but a dream. Dreams are nothing to worry you with; forget it as soon as you can."

"But I want to tell you more."

"What more?"

"He was one of them."

"Who?"

"The man calling himself Gault."

"Do you know him?"

"Oh, I dread him, I don't know why, Mr. White, but I do dread that man. There is something about him which I can't explain, but—but he is a bad man, I know."

"Don't be afraid of him. He shall not harm you."

"I—I don't know why I dread this voyage."

"Down the river?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why should you dread it?"

"I don't know; but the boat, I'm afraid of it. Why could not uncle have selected some other boat than the John J. Roe for me?"

Perhaps he did not know of any other that would make the trip through to New Orleans without change."

"Maybe he did not, but I'm afraid of the journey. Oh, I wish you could go."

Then she saw that her speech was a bold one, and she blushed quite profusely.

Dick Wright was silent for a moment, and then said:

"I wish I could go."

"Can't you?"

"I can't say. I fear not. I will try to go, but it is yet too early for me to say whether I will go or not."

She saw that he was perplexed, and was at a loss what to think of it. Ethel turned about and was going to her room, when he suddenly sprang to her side, and seizing her hand in his, said:

"Miss Elliott, pardon me, but there is one thing I want to say to

you before you go. I want to say that—that you can rest assured that I will not be far away from you at any time, and should danger hover nigh you'll will be on hand to avert it."

"Thank you."

"And he—"

"The man calling himself Gault," she interrupted.

"Yes, I will see that he does not harm you."

"Thank you."

"I will watch him with the eye of a hawk, and he will not escape my notice."

Then Dick left her and went out upon the veranda in front of the hotel.

There stood Gault coolly smoking a cigar and looking down upon the river.

"Have a weed, Mr. White?" he said, handing a cigar to Dick.

Dick took it, though he felt very much like rejecting it.

"Do you see that?"

"What?" asked Dick.

The fellow pointed with his forefinger at the tug which was steaming down the river.

"Your boat."

"Why do you say my boat?"

"Well, it is yours, isn't it?"

"No."

"I thought it was. Where is it going?"

"How should I know?"

"I thought you knew all, as you were on board of her so very lately."

"What signifies that? I went on board her to see a friend, and for no other purpose. Because you went on board the John J. Roe yesterday is no proof that you own the boat, or that you know anything about its destination."

The fellow was really becoming insolent, and turning about Dick walked away from him.

He hurried down the street to give his temper an opportunity to cool.

"She fears him," he said to himself. "The villain has in some way given her some cause to fear him—of that I am perfectly well convinced. The scoundrel has been threatening her. But she does not know that he is going on board the same craft with her. Ah! if she knew it, she would almost die with horror. I don't blame her, for if ever there was a villain he is one."

He was reckless as to his course, for he only cared to walk off his passion, and when he found himself at the west end of the city limits he was a little surprised. Turning quickly about he was retracing his steps when he suddenly came upon Mr. Gault.

"Hello!" said Dick.

"Hello!" returned Gault.

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a walk. Where are you going?"

"The same."

At this moment there came on the startled air the distant boom of a small cannon far down the river. The men who had just met both started back and gazed at each other in looks of inquiry.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Then followed more faintly rattling volleys of small arms.

Dick Wright's eyes glowed with the glory of battle. Oh, how he wished he was on board his small tug to take part in the conflict.

John Flynn he knew had found the James Boys and was driving them hard.

The boom of the little cannon went on, and the shouts of the combatants could be heard.

He almost forgot Gault, and wheeling about he hurried rapidly toward the river. He walked at first, and then he ran, nor did he stop until he was on the banks of the broad Mississippi.

Then he saw a sight that filled him with frenzy. The pirate tug was steaming out across the river, and after her came his own tug firing one gun.

"Why don't they use both?" he cried.

"Because one is disabled," answered a deep voice at his side.

"You here?" he shouted, as on wheeling about he saw Mr. Gault.

"Yes," Gault answered.

"Why did you come?"

"Why did you come?"

"To see the fight."

"So did I."

After all there was nothing strange and unnatural in the man wanting to see the fight, and Dick said no more.

Dick watched the fight with no little degree of concern.

"The pirate is retreating," he said.

"Yes, but the other boat is getting the worst of the fight," said Gault. He spoke truly, as Dick was forced to admit. His own boat had one gun disabled, and by bad handling of the other was

doing the pirate but little damage, while the other tug was handling the two small swivels with wonderful skill.

Scarce was one tired and pulled forward to be loaded, ere the second was shoved into the port, and ~~saw~~ a bullet whizzing at her pursuer, to be pulled back and the other shoved forward in its place.

The short smoke-stack of the little tug was shot off close to the deck.

Then her pilot-wheel was shattered, and the man holding it fearfully wounded. The detective's boat was getting the worst of it, and turned into shore, leaving the James Boys and their craft to escape.

"Your friends are whipped," said Gault.

"You talk as if you exulted in it."

"No, sir. I know nothing of either party, I assure you, and don't understand the cause of the quarrel."

He spoke so innocently that the detective half believed him.

The river shore was lined with people, drawn out by the fight, wondering what it all meant.

When the craft of the detective came in to shore, he hurried down to learn what damage it had sustained.

It was badly used up. One of the policemen had been killed, and Dick's pilot was dangerously wounded. The police boat was unsafe, and he telegraphed to St. Louis for another.

It came, and, manning it with a good crew, he set out to find the pirate, but nowhere could it be found.

In the meanwhile the John J. Roe was fitted up and got ready for her voyage.

One among the first to register was Mr. Gault, of Gault, Missouri. The man was, as the reader is aware, Jesse James in disguise.

"Now let the fool search for the tug. I will take a voyage on the John J. Roe, one of her first passengers," said Jesse James, and the bandit king chuckled to himself.

He was more than delighted when Ethel Elliott came aboard.

"My boat and crew are below waiting for us," said Jesse to himself. "Everything works well."

CHAPTER XIV.

SUSPECTED.

The John J. Roe was slow about starting. The shore was lined with people who came to see the great vessel launch forth upon her voyage.

So long had she been tied up ashore that it was like launching a new vessel. In fact, she was almost new throughout.

Painted up and furnished in elegant style, the great vessel looked not a little unlike a palace as she lay at the dock.

The last load of freight had been brought aboard, the last passenger was on deck, and the stage plank was pulled in.

"Cast off line!" cried the captain's mate.

Then came the usual he-l-oho! and pulling on the lines.

At the same time the ponderous wheels began slowly revolving, dashing the water in foaming spray to the stern, and the great vessel slowly, very slowly at first, moved away from the shore.

"Ha, ha, ha! She is gone," Jesse James chuckled to himself as he stood on the fore deck and watched the receding shore. "Now, she is on her voyage, and she will never make it. All the gold is in the hull. I know where the silver and gold for the New Orleans mint lies concealed, but ha, ha, ha!"

As he turned about he saw an old man standing on the deck near him.

His face was pale, his beard long and white, as well as his hair, but his listless eye had something like a youthful flash in it.

Jesse gave the old fellow a critical look.

He was about sixty years of age, though his form was as straight as a man of twenty. He wore a long frock coat, and black pants, with a gray vest. His silk hat was black and glossy.

Jesse watched the old man for some moments, but as soon as the old fellow saw that he was watched he walked away.

"He's shy," thought the bandit.

The bandit rose and entered the ladies' cabin.

"She's aboard. Ha, ha, ha! I will see her now and make known to her that I shall have the pleasure of being a fellow passenger."

Ethel Elliott was standing at the rear of the cabin when he came in, and she did not see him until he was at her side.

"You have begun your voyage," he said.

"What!" she cried, "are you here?"

"Yes."

She sank on a sofa and felt as if she were going to faint.

"I—I—didn't dream of it."

"Hope we may have a pleasant voyage, Miss Elliott."

"I hope so."

"The cabin is suffocatingly hot and close," thought Ethel. "I will put on my shawl and go out on deck."

She threw her shawl about her shoulders and went out on deck.

She was standing leaning against the rail, when a voice at her side said:

"Too close inside for you?"

To her horror it was Gault.

"Yes."

She turned about and was going.

"Wait."

"Sir?"

"I want to speak with you."

"What about?"

"I want to ask you some questions."

"I don't know that I am on a witness stand."

She was going, when he placed a hand on her arm and said:

"Stop."

"Unhand me, or I will scream."

"I must—"

At this moment a hand clutched Jesse James' arm with a vise-like grip.

"Stop, sir. Release her!"

Jesse's eyes flashed a dangerous fire, and wheeling about he saw standing before him the old, white-haired, white-bearded man.

"Who are you?"

"Lemuel Bates."

"Why do you interfere?"

"The young lady does not want to talk with you."

"I want to explain."

"Release her."

"Old man—"

"Release her."

"You are digging a pitfall for yourself. Be careful how you trifle with me."

"Oh, nonsense. I've seen many a bully before. I mean what I say when I say you must not persecute this lady."

Jesse felt those words sink in his very soul, and his hand, which still held the frightened girl, trembled a moment, then relaxed its hold, and she went to the cabin.

The old man was turning away, when Jesse seized his arm.

"Stay."

"Well, sir?"

"Who are you?"

"I have told you my name is Lemuel Bates."

"Do you live in New Orleans?"

"I said so. Go to the United States mint when you get there, and see if you can't find Lemuel Bates."

Jesse James was still aft when the old gentleman entered the cabin, where poor, frightened Ethel sat on a sofa sobbing in her terror and dread.

"I beg pardon, young lady, for this intrusion."

"No intrusion, sir. I want to talk with you."

"I suppose so."

"Sit here by my side."

"Thank you."

He sat down.

"I want to thank you for rescuing me from that villain."

"Oh, don't mention it."

"I must. I felt that I would die if someone did not come to my relief."

"I would like to ask you about him, if you have no objection?"

"I have none."

"Do you know his name?"

"Gault."

"That is the name under which he registered, but it is not his real name."

"What is his real name?"

"I cannot say now—I don't believe it is Gault."

"This is the only name I know him by."

"How long have you known him?"

"Not long."

"Where did you first meet him?"

"At Hannibal."

"Never before?"

"No."

"And has he been persistently persecuting you ever since?"

"He has."

"For what cause?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I have to inform you, young lady, that your persecutor is going to New Orleans on this boat."

"Then may heaven help me—I cannot survive the voyage in his company."

"Be brave and he shall not harm you."

"I will try to be brave."

"Can you confide in me?"

"I believe I can."

"Then I assure you he will not harm you."

"I had better get off the boat at St. Louis."

"I would rather you would not."

"Why?"

"I have reasons for wishing you to continue the voyage, and you shall not be harmed."

The old man said many other things to assure her he was in earnest, and leaving her added:

"Be comforted, now, and believe me that no harm shall befall you."

"I do believe you."

She went to her stateroom a few moments later, and turning on the light saw an envelope on the floor. It had evidently been dropped through the transom.

Picking it up she found it addressed to herself.

"What can it mean?" she asked herself.

Quickly tearing open the envelope, she read:

"Don't be alarmed. I am near you, and will be ever ready to defend you from danger. White."

Then she remembered what her friend White had promised her at Hannibal.

"Oh, can it be that he is aboard? Yes, he is. Of course he is, and now I begin to have my suspicions aroused. However, be it as it may, I shall feel much safer than I felt before, now that I know he is on board."

In the meanwhile the old man who had befriended her was walking slowly and thoughtfully up and down the forward cabin.

His brow was contracted into a little bundle of knots and cords, and he was evidently sorely puzzled on some question.

"I may be wrong, but I will investigate the matter and see."

He sauntered leisurely out on deck. A rough, sailor-looking fellow met him, and said:

"Er man wants ter see yer."

"Who?" asked Bates.

"Dun know."

"Where?"

"Aft."

Bates was hurrying aft along the narrow passage just outside the cabin, when as he was passing a wheel house there came a flash of fire from the darkness, a sharp report, and the old man fell with a groan.

"Ha, ha, ha! That's settled," hissed a villainous voice, and a pair of feet scampered away.

CHAPTER XV.

IN DOUBT.

The wildest confusion immediately prevailed on board the John J. Roe.

"Who fired that shot?" demanded the captain.

"A man aft," answered someone.

"Where?"

"He was at the wheel house."

"Capture him. Is anybody hurt?"

"He killed an old man."

By this time, however, the old man was staggering to his feet.

"I am not killed," he answered. "I am not hurt."

"Didn't the bullet hit you?"

"No."

"Why did you fall?"

The old man mumbled out some answer to this, but it was unintelligible to those near.

"He is dazed by the bullet," whispered someone.

The women were screaming and children crying, and perfect pandemonium reigned within the boat.

The captain went to the old man, and taking his arm, said:

"Come forward, sir—let us see if you are wounded."

"I assure you I am not hurt."

He was ushered into the cabin, however, regardless of his protests that he was not hurt and made to sit down.

Nothing could be made out of him, and he was permitted to go to his stateroom.

He had not been there long before a smile lighted up his face. Closing the door, he drew down the transom blinds, and turning on the light, discovered a hole in the breast of his coat above the heart.

"The rascal shoots well," he said.

Taking off his coat and vest, there under his shirt was a neat, well-made chain armor fitting close to the body, in which was embedded a bullet.

"Well done. It served me a good purpose that time. Now let me see what can be done with the villain. Who is he?"

The old man removed his tall hat, took off his white wig and

snowy beard, and the reader would have been amazed at the transformation.

He was Dick Wright, the detective.

Laying aside that disguise, he quickly changed his clothes for a rough boatman's suit he had put in his valise, and his hair was changed to a red curly wig, his beard a short dark brown.

His tall silk hat of Mr. Lemuel Bates gave place to a soft felt hat.

The disguise being complete, he went to the rear door of his stateroom, which opened on the outside deck.

He listened a long time. Then he turned off his light, and raising the curtain over the little transom window, took a peep without. All was still and quiet. No one was near, and he softly opened the door.

Dick Wright had his revolver in his hand, and was dangerous had he met Gault. But Gault was nowhere to be seen.

"I have my doubts yet if the villain recognized me. If he did, well and good; I can play three or four characters here."

He crept slowly down the tier of doors along the outside, counting as he went, until he had counted nineteen.

"This is her door," he said.

He paused and gave three light taps. Then he listened for a long time to hear some response. None came. Then he gave three more taps just a little louder.

Someone was moving about within.

Tap, tap, tap! still louder.

"Who is there?" asked a voice close to the door.

"Miss Elliott?" he called softly.

"Well?"

"It is I."

"Who?"

He remembered now that he had called himself John White, and he said:

"John White."

"What! Is it possible?" the girl asked.

"I don't dare speak loud, Miss Elliott, for I will be heard by those whom we don't want to hear us."

"Shall I let you come in?"

"If you please."

He heard the bolt click, and the door was about to open, when he saw a dark shadow gliding forward from a little lower down, and in a suppressed whisper said:

"Whist! not now. Lock your door."

Then he crept forward to a dark corner.

"What does this mean?" the detective asked himself. "Ha! there are two of them."

The two forms came only a step or two at a time, halting each moment to listen.

When they were within three paces of the detective they came to a halt, and one of them said:

"Well, I don't believe the old man is the detective."

"Then give him a rest. His promise, though, to help the girl makes me hate him."

Gault, or rather Jesse James, for the reader knows him by this time, wheeled about and started quickly along the narrow passageway right toward Dick Wright. The detective tried to get out of his way, but it was impossible.

He came rushing along at a headlong speed, struck his foot against Dick, and plunged over him head over heels.

"What's the matter?" cried Bill Chadwell.

Jesse's head had struck a piece of timber, and he was stunned and unconscious from the fall.

"What is it, Cap?"

No answer.

But at this moment Bill Chadwell caught a glimpse of a crunching object and leaped upon it.

"Aha! I have you!"

It was a fearful struggle. The boat kept steadily on, and the two men clung to each other with the grip of death. They said nothing. Neither uttered a scream, and all was quiet.

A swinging lantern at the stern of the boat at this moment swung slightly around, so that its rays fell full on the faces of the two men, and Bill Chadwell said:

"Aha, it's you. Then the shot for the old man was for naught."

Dick Wright knew that he could not fire his revolver, so grasping it in his hand he struck out before him, and sent the butt of the weapon with a whack against Bill's face, and he fell senseless to the deck.

A wild wish at this moment sprang up in the heart of the detective to make both prisoners. He was hurrying away when he met the captain.

"What's the matter back there?" the captain asked.

"Two fellows were fighting, captain," said Dick.

"Come on, boys," he said to half a dozen of his men. "I will see that this is stopped."

They hurried aft, and soon had Jesse and Bill Chadwell prisoners before either recovered.

"Search 'em," said Dick. "They had revolvers, I believe."

"So they have."

"Now, captain, keep them in irons until you get to St. Louis, and I will swear out a warrant against them."

"I'll do it."

Dick Wright chuckled to himself as he hurried again toward the stateroom of Miss Ethel Elliott.

"We will reach St. Louis to-morrow," he said to himself, "and then I will make the captain acquainted with his prisoner. Ha, ha, ha! He little dreamt he had the bandit king of America a prisoner."

Reaching Miss Elliott's room he tapped.

"Is it Mr. White?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is all going right?"

"It is. Can I come in?"

"Yes."

She opened the door and he stepped inside her narrow stateroom.

"Your enemy is in trouble."

"Gault?"

"Yes."

"He and another have been arrested for fighting. Now you can go to sleep and sleep in safety, for they will be handed over to the police when we reach St. Louis and severely dealt with, so you need have no fears of them."

"Do you think they can get away?"

"Oh, no."

"I hope so."

"Why?"

"So we shan't be bothered with them."

Dick, for good reasons which he did not care to give, hoped they would not escape.

The ax was not quite ready to fall upon the James Boys. He wanted to bag the whole gang, or at least Frank and Jesse, before the ax fell in earnest, but as it was he could only have Jesse and Bill Chadwell.

But he was not so foolish as to let Jesse James slip through his fingers when once he had got his clutches on him.

"I will see the captain," he thought, "and caution him to be very particular about his prisoners, and not let them escape."

But it was no part of his plan to tell the captain who they were.

It was not professional, for Dick would have lost the reward for capturing them.

Making an excuse for retiring, and promising to see her early in the morning, Dick Wright took his departure secretly through the door at the rear of the stateroom.

Once out, he hastened to the cabin and asked for the captain.

"He is on deck," answered a red-headed mate.

Then Dick hastened up on deck, and asked:

"Where is Captain Asbury?"

"He is at the bow."

At this moment Dick heard the voice of the captain speaking amid the gloom and fog.

"It's so dark and the fog is so thick that we can't move than creep."

"We had as well tie up," the pilot from the pilot-house was heard saying.

"We had as well—it's not safe with a boat of this size," Captain Asbury answered.

"Shall I signal to put in?"

"Yes, at the first available place."

"We're off Coon Point, and I think we can make it there."

"Where is Hog Island?"

"A mile below."

"Land there, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, do it."

"All right."

Dick now approached the captain.

"Captain Asbury, where are the prisoners?"

"Safe locked up."

"Will you keep them until morning?"

"If you can assure me they are criminals. They protest their innocence, and I don't know any right I have to hold them. I am in doubt whether I can keep them."

"Captain Asbury, I give you my word it will not do to let the men go."

"Give me some assurance that they are criminals."

Now what was he to do? He dared not tell the captain who they were, for if he did the captain would claim the heavy reward.

"Captain, I want to tell you who I am, and why I demand the men."

"Well, sir, we are going down to Hog Island to tie up until morning. I will see you when we are safely landed, but just now every moment of my time is taken up and I can't talk with you."

A short while after the projecting branches of a tree on shore struck the pilot-house and smashed a hole in the side of it.

The steamer backed off a moment, and then slowed gradually in to shore.

"Lay to—lay to!"

She rounded in gradually and came up under the bank, having sustained no serious damages.

"Make her fast to the tree—make her fast!" sang out the captain.

It was done in a moment, and they were snugly up against the shore, tied hard and fast.

"Now if my fellows would only come," thought Dick Wright.

The wish was hardly expressed before the light from a small tug was seen approaching them.

"Tug ahoy!" called out the captain.

"Aye, aye!" someone responded.

"What do you want?"

"To lay alongside."

"John Flynn?" called Dick.

"Dick, is it you?"

"Yes, come aboard."

"As soon as I can."

"Look here, sir, what does this mean?" asked Captain Asbury, who was rather of a suspicious nature.

"Captain, I want to tell you who I am."

"Well, who are you?"

"The detective?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any proof?"

"Here's my star. Now, those two prisoners are men I have been tracking for a long time, captain."

"Is that so?" the astonished captain said.

"It is."

"Well, sir, I guess I'll have to turn 'em over to you, but answer me some questions."

"What are they, captain?"

"Haven't you been raising a racket with these fellows all night?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't it you who knocked them senseless?"

"Yes, I knocked one senseless, but the other only stumbled and struck his head against a beam with such force as to knock him senseless."

At this moment John Flynn came on board.

"John, we've got two of them," said Dick.

"Is it possible?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's a good start."

"Excellent."

"Where are they?"

"Below," said the captain.

"There is my tug, captain. I will take them aboard, and relieve you of any responsibility for them."

"All right—come on."

They hurried down to the boiler deck, where, in a little sort of a dungeon apartment set off from the other apartments, was the place of confinement of Jesse James and Bill Chadwell.

"They are in there," said the captain.

"Didn't you have a guard?"

"No."

"Well, ten to one they are gone."

"The door was locked."

"I don't care if it was."

"Ten to one they are there."

"Open the door."

"By George, the lock is broken," said Captain Asbury.

"Yes, and the birds have flown," said Dick Wright, opening the door and thrusting a lantern inside, which revealed the fact that the apartment was empty.

"Gone!"

"Yes, gone."

"Where?"

"Ashore on the Missouri side, perhaps."

"Well, by gun, it beats all," growled Captain Asbury. "Who would a thought o' their gettin' away?"

"Captain Asbury?" said Dick Wright, sharply.

"What?"

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK WRIGHT AND THE TUG.

The detective was taken a little aback by Captain Asbury's answer. He was parleying with himself what was the best course to adopt in the premises.

"Do you know who you've let slip through your fingers by your carelessness?"

"No—who?"

"Jesse James, the bandit king of America!"

"What? Impossible!"

"Yes, you have."

"Was one of those men Jesse James?"

"He was."

"And I never knew it."

"It was Jesse James. I know him. I connived at his capture, and, knowing that he was aboard this boat, had my men to follow him in the tug."

"Well, well. Oh, they must be somewhere hiding on the boat." cried Captain Asbury. "I will send out and have them hunted up."

"It will be no use."

But the captain had a thorough search of the vessel made, all to no purpose.

The two outlaws had escaped.

Dick Wright knew the character of the men too well to waste any time or thought in attempting to capture them.

"What are you going to do now, Dick?" John Flynn asked.

"I am going aboard the tug for a day or two."

"We sighted her," said John.

"What—the pirate tug?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just at dark."

"Did you give chase?"

"Yes, but she disappeared in the fog and darkness."

Dick then turned to Captain Asbury, who was giving vent to more than one strong expression at his allowing the James Boys to go.

"Captain, are you going to stop in St. Louis?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Don't know. We've got to get these repairs made. We must lay there a day or two at the furthest."

"All right; I will probably see you there."

"Say, if you get any more of the James Boys I want you to let me know it, so I can see that they don't get away."

"I will, captain, but don't blame yourself too much. It was as much my fault as yours."

Then Dick wrote a note, very hurriedly folded it and put it in an envelope, which he sealed and addressed to Miss Ethel Elliott.

This he gave to a porter and told him to give it to the young lady next morning.

Then he hurried out over the side of the boat and entered the tug.

When Dick Wright was in his own tug he glanced about over his men—eight strong, brave fellows, and the tug inside had the appearance of a man-of-war.

"Well, boys, we've made a water haul so far, but better luck next time," said Dick.

"Yes; it's no use to grieve about spilt milk," John Flynn answered. "Now, Dick, what do you propose doing?"

"Let go our cable and let us creep about in the fog. We may run on the pirate."

"It's a good idea."

"Man the guns, and be ready to hound her to death the moment we come in sight."

This tug mounted three guns, all small, four-pounders, though. Two were in the forecastle, and the third at the stern, so that they could give it to the enemy either advancing or retreating.

The tug began moving slowly and carefully through the water. Slowly she went around the island, and had almost completed half the circle, when the man in the bow cried:

"There she is!"

Boom!

A solid four-pound shot whizzed above the bow of the boat, and went skipping over the water.

"Give it to her!" roared Dick Wright.

Boom!

Boom!

A crash was heard, telling a shot had struck, but a moment later all was engulfed in utter darkness. The river pirate had not been seriously disabled, and had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RIVER PIRATES.

If Jesse James was surprised on regaining consciousness to find himself a prisoner, he was agreeably surprised soon after to find that he and Bill Chadwell were put in a room on the boiler deck without a guard.

"Now, Bill, we must get out of this," he said.

"It's easy done," Bill thought.

"Can you force the lock?"

"I can try."

"You ought to do it—you are said to be as stout as an ox."

"It won't require an oxen's strength to get that door open."

"Then do it."

Bill Chadwell placed his brawny shoulder against the door. It cracked beneath his weight. He gave it a sudden dash and the lock broke, the door burst open, and they were free.

At this moment the boat ran into the tree which so nearly caused the ruin of the pilot-house.

Jesse James clasped the hand of Bill Chadwell in his own, and the twain crept slowly and cautiously through the darkness.

"Bill, we've got to make a leap in the dark," said Jesse.

"All right," Bill answered, "I am ready to do it."

"It's a risky plunge."

"But there is no other help for it, I suppose."

"No."

"Then we'll do it."

They leaped off at the stern of the vessel and unperceived reached Hog Island.

The puffing of a tug at no great distance away was heard, but as it was coming directly toward the steamer both knew it was not their own vessel.

"Well, Bill, this is an unpleasant predicament," said Jesse James to his companion, as they wandered up the bank, their clothes dripping water from them.

"Now, Jess, what are we to do when day dawns?"

"Hide in the woods."

"I don't know but they'll find us."

"We can travel so far they can't."

"We are on an island."

"An island?"

"Yes."

"What island?"

"Hog Island."

"How large is Hog Island?"

"It has six or seven hundred acres in it, I suppose, and is said to be thickly timbered."

"Well, maybe we can find some place to hide."

"They'll scan it well."

"Isn't there a chance to get over?"

"It's not far across to the Illinois side."

"Oh, hang the Illinois side. We don't want to monkey about in Illinois. How far is it over to the Missouri side?"

"A mile and a half."

"We can't make it."

"No, the water is too cold, and we'll die with cramp before we got half way over."

They had been walking straight ahead through the wood while they were talking, and now had crossed the narrow neck of land and were within hearing of the dash of waters on the other side.

"Bill?"

"Well?"

"There's water ahead."

"Yes. The island is narrow here."

"There is marsh lands on the left. Hello! What's that?"

Something came flying through the air.

A wild, hoarse cry rang out on the air—a cry which every hunter along the river knows reached their ears.

"It's hawks," said Bill Chadwell.

"They were in the water beyond," said Jesse. "Now, I wonder what it was scared them up?"

"I don't know."

At this moment Jesse James made a violent start, and seized Bill's arm.

"What is it, Jess?"

"Whist!"

"What is it?"

"A boat. A tug."

"The detectives. They are on the watch for us," gasped Bill Chadwell, gnashing his teeth in his rage. Unarmed and alone the two bandits seemed in the last ditch.

But as they crept nearer and nearer, and still nearer, there was something about the tug which was very familiar to them. At last the chief said:

"It's our own boat."

"What, Jesse—what do you say?" asked Bill Chadwell.

"It's our own boat."

"Are you quite sure? Don't make a move until you are quite sure."

"I know that it is."

"Well, how are we to make ourselves known?"

"Easiest in the world."

"How easy?"

"Frank will know my signal."

Then Jesse James put his hands to his mouth, and forming a sort of whistle, gave utterance to a peculiar kind of cry, which rang out on the night air, sounding not unlike the cry of a night bird.

"Will he answer it?" asked Bill.

"If he hears it."

"Well, he will certainly hear it if he is within ten miles. Such an awful ear-splitting scream was never before heard, I don't think."

"No doubt he is there. It can't be that Frank is away, but why don't he answer?"

Jesse was growing annoyed at the delay in answering his signal.

But the answer came at last. It was a clear, ear-splitting whistle or scream.

"We are safe now," said Jesse. "Come on."

They then began to advance. The little speck of light which they saw before them was only the small amount of light that issued from the stern window of the tug.

"Hello! I'm in the water," said Bill, struggling through the half-submerged willows and quicksands.

"Look out for the quicksands!" said Jesse.

"I'm in them."

"Come out."

"I am sinking."

"Then get out quick."

It was no easy matter for the river pirate to extricate his feet and pull out of the quicksands, but he finally managed to reach some driftwood and crawled upon it.

The light in the stern of the tug had now disappeared, and they were in total darkness.

Jesse had also reached the pile of driftwood and stood upon it.

The water was on every side of them.

"Jesse, the river is rising up on every side of us," said Bill Chadwell.

"I know it, and this heap of driftwood will soon be washed away."

"So it will."

"Then what'll we do?"

"We must either get back to the island or swim over to the Illinois side."

At this moment a voice called:

"Jesse!"

"Well?"

"Come higher up."

They clambered back to the shore, and following the voice soon reached their tug and were taken aboard.

Scarce had the tired wretches changed their wet garments for dry ones ere the detectives' tug was discovered, and firing a shot at it they fled in fog and darkness, but not until a solid four-pound shot had crashed into the upper part of their cabin.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON A LOG.

Dick Wright was like an enraged lion caged.

He walked the deck of his little vessel, and, turning to the pilot, said:

"Press on! Press on!"

"In this darkness and fog?"

"Yes."

"It is dangerous."

"No more for us than for them. There should be no stop until the fiends have been swept from the earth."

The near proximity of the James Boys to the steamer on which was Ethel Elliott may have made Dick Wright a little more furious and less cool headed than he otherwise would have been.

The pilot, a daring man himself, signaled more speed, and drove the little craft like an arrow through fog and darkness.

"Dick," said John Flynn, "it seems to me that there might be some danger of us running away from them in this blind chase."

"You are right, John," Dick answered, his sober common sense coming to his relief. "We'll check up now and pursue our search a little more careful."

"It will be better."

"Go slower," he called to the pilot; "we have missed her."

The pilot instantly signaled to slow up, and the little vessel ran slowly through the darkness.

"Now, boys, take your positions on deck and watch closely. I'll give a hundred dollars to the man who first sights the pirate."

This was greeted with a little cheer, and with night-glasses and Winchester rifles, the detective's crews took their stations on various parts of the tug, straining their eyes to catch a glimpse of it.

But no eyes were keener than those whetted with vengeance. The detective had ample cause for hating the James Boys, and he

had now a double cause to fear them, since by Jesse's acts he had threatened Miss Elliott.

"Why does he follow the John J. Roe," Dick thought, "unless it is to make that poor girl a captive? I will defend her with my life."

The tug was darting about hither and thither in its search for the river pirate.

At last it came up near enough to see the island. There was a bar, or projecting tongue, of land within a cable's length away. The projecting tongue of land was not over fifty yards across, and the fog slightly lifting at this moment revealed the lights of the pirate tug on the other side.

"There she is!" cried Dick. "Man the guns."

Half a dozen rifle shots rang out from the pirate, and the bullets whizzed above the deck of the tug.

Boom! Boom! rang out the two small cannons, the echo rolling among the hills up and down the river, as if ten thousand slumbering fiends had been awakened.

Boom! Boom! came two answering shots. The air was damp and heavy, and the smoke and fog completely hid the lights.

Dick's boat had not been struck as yet, but like a good general he determined by oft changing his position to prevent the enemy from getting his range, and sweeping him with their guns.

But Jesse James was just as shrewd as he, and changed his own position.

They fired again and again at each other, the small cannon balls either skipping over the waters or tearing up trees and distant shores, but doing each other no harm.

The smoke and fog were absolutely too thick for them to see each other, and the echoes of the guns made the reports so deceiving that they could not locate each other.

"I'll run around the point and charge the pirates at all hazards," said Dick to John Flynn. "What do you think of it, John?"

"It's a little risky."

"May it not succeed?"

"Oh, yes: we can't tell in a case like this what will and what won't succeed, Dick. We've got to run our chances."

"Yes, and we'll run them now."

Then he gave the order to his pilot and engineer to run around the point and make for them.

"All right," the pilot answered.

Then the little craft stole away in the darkness, and carefully felt its way around to the same side of the island on which the pirate lay.

There was no wind, and the fog and smoke from the guns lay so thick that they could scarcely see a rod ahead, even by the aid of the most powerful headlights.

"Steady—steady!" Dick said, in an undertone to his pilot.

"Dick?" John Flynn cautiously called.

"Well, John?"

"What do you intend doing?"

"Run alongside of her, and carry her by the board."

"That's a bold scheme."

"Yes; but the boldest is the best."

Boom! went a shot from the river pirate.

The dropping of distant branches of trees on the island could mark the path of the ball.

"There they are," said John Flynn, chuckling, "'blazing away across the island at us, and we almost on them."

"Steady, boys, steady," cried Dick.

"Aye, aye!"

"Stand ready to jump."

Cutlasses were brought up from the little cabin, and each man armed himself with a cutlass as well as revolvers.

"You'll find the swords of equally as much value in a hand-to-hand fight as revolvers," said Dick. "Now, all stand ready."

Then, as if shining through a thick veil, they caught the glimmer of the light from the pirate tug shining through the fog. Closer and closer they drew toward it.

Now each man holds his breath. The headlight is turned off, and all lights on the detective boat extinguished.

The James Boys' tug lay close up under the bank in the over-flowed ground, and all about it were tall reeds and willows.

Those tugs were quite small, and neither drew much water.

Slowly Dick Wright's craft stole forward, and they could feel the tall grass and submerged willows sweeping along under the bottom of their keel. They continued carefully feeling their way along through the darkness and water, and slowly, very slowly, advancing.

Boom! rang out another small gun from the pirate, and the smoke for a brief instant concealed the buccaneer's lights.

"It's no use to fire any more shots in the dark, Bill," said a voice, which both Dick Wright and John Flynn instantly recognized as belonging to Jesse James. "They have gone."

"Or sunk," added another.

"No danger of any such good luck."

"We may have 'em on us at any minute."

"Yes; we must get out of here before daylight, and the sooner we are out from Hog Island the better it will be for us."

"You are right."

"Then let's pull out at once. Pilot, are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Let her go."

There was a rush of steam and a whirr of the propeller wheel. Dick Wright was not expecting the river pirate to rush at him in that manner. The smoke of the gun concealed everything, and almost before they were aware of it Jesse James' craft was passing them so close their gunwales touched.

Both boats were moving in different directions, and the river pirate was going at a good speed.

"Here they are," shouted Dick. "Board them."

He set the example himself by making a spring at Jesse's craft.

A wild yell announced that they had been discovered. They were met by a volley of shots. Dick heard some one drop back in the water.

He was so engaged, however, in his vain endeavors to get a foothold on the pirate that he could give his followers but little attention.

The sudden appearance of the pirate boat had confused him as well as his men. It was almost past when he leaped at it, and he landed on the outside rim just aft the rear cabin under the guns, and but a few feet from the propeller.

He was concealed from the buccaneers here, and as he soon became satisfied that he was the only one of his crew who had succeeded in reaching the pirate, he resolved to not make his presence known.

He had his revolver in his hand, though he had been compelled to drop his sword. But what could he do against such overwhelming odds as were on the pirate tug?

It's a close place, thought Dick Wright, as he clung to his position, threatening every moment to slide off and be crushed by the propeller wheel of the tug. "If I make myself known here I will be shot to pieces. I might kill one or two of them, but the James Boys would literally riddle me with bullets."

He listened now to the voices above.

The deck seemed to really be crowded with men, and he heard them talking of more to join them soon.

"Jess," said Bill Chadwell, "why don't you attack this detective and sink him?"

"Wait," Jesse answered.

"Wait? I see no need of waiting when we are being cut off every day."

"Oh, no, Bill, now we haven't lost a man yet."

"Well, you and I came very near to losing our lives on the steamer."

"Yes, but that has nothing to do with our future, only to warn us not to be caught in a like scrape."

"Yes."

"Now, I am going to get all our boys aboard, Cole Younger and the others. When we have all told we'll number twenty-five or thirty, and be able to crush the detective out of existence."

"Well, this is valuable information," said Dick, "but how am I to avail myself of it? Here I sit on the stern of their boat, my own vessel—I don't know where."

Boom!

A distant report, and the crash of a heavy ball, as it struck the gunwale not two feet from his head, glanced away and hit the cabin, caused his ruminations to come to a sudden end.

"Is anyone hit?" cried Jesse.

"No."

"Sure?"

"Flash the lantern."

A light blazed over the deck above.

"No, no one's hit."

"Was that a random shot, Jess?" asked Jim Cummins.

"Of course. Who could see to fire in this darkness and fog?"

"It was, but it came near being a bad one. Look what a piece it ripped up from the gunwale of the ship, and what a hole it tore in the cabin."

"It will be returned at the proper time."

Then came a silence. Two men came aft and stood just above the concealed detective, and so near to him that Dick could almost have touched them with his hand. Realizing how dangerous his position was, Dick kept very quiet, yet his hands were cramped by holding on to the sliding, rounded stern of the boat, and he had to exert all his strength to keep from falling off into the water. The detective was not slow in making out the two men to be Jesse James and his brother Frank.

"Jesse, that detective, Dick Wright, must be got rid of, or he will be the death of us."

"I believe it."

"He is dangerous."

"Yes."

"You know the cause?"

"It's on account of Wicher."

"Yes. Wicher was his brother-in-law, and after we killed him Dick Wright promised his sister, so I have been told, that he would not stop in his efforts, night or day, until he had avenged Wicher's death."

"I have heard the same story, and now, when we get all the band together, I am going to offer a reward of a thousand dollars to the man who will kill him."

"A good idea."

At this moment there was a crash—a shock—and the machinery of the boat became still. All was the wildest confusion when it was ascertained that the Black Cloud had run into a raft.

Dick Wright lost his hold and fell into the water. Mechanically he struck out and began to swim. By accident he reached a log, and almost before he was aware of what he was doing he had climbed upon it, and went floating down the Mississippi.

CHAPTER XIX.

DICK WRIGHT'S PERIL.

Floating down the river on a log is by no means pleasant.

At any moment the log might roll upon its side, might turn from left to right, and plunge him under so that he would be drowned, but Dick was brave, had nerves of steel, and clung to his only means of riding the waves.

The water at this season of the year was intensely cold, and he was chilled through by it. Every bone in his body ached and his teeth chattered with the cold.

"I can't stand this long," he thought.

But just as he was on the point of despairing the log ran aground. He landed on Hog Island, and a few moments later, the fog clearing, espied his own boat but a short distance away.

He went down to it and was taken on board, where a suit of dry clothes were given him. He related to John Flynn his wonderful adventure on board the Black Cloud, and of it running into the raft.

The tug then steamed slowly down the island until the steamer was reached, and Dick Wright went aboard.

He hurried to his stateroom, divested himself of his disguise as Lemuel Bates, and once more disguised as a sailor, went ashore.

Hurrying up the street he did not see three men who followed close after him.

"That is he!" one of his followers, who was none other than Jesse James, said. "That is Dick Wright, the detective. Now, we must see that he never leaves St. Louis alive."

"You are right, Jess, he shan't," said another.

Dick, all unconscious of the near proximity of the three men, went to a small hotel near the river and engaged a room. Then he went and got a dinner at a restaurant, and attiring himself in citizen's garb went down to the boat. It was dark and the three men watched him.

He remained until late, then, in company with a dozen others, came back to his hotel.

"There he goes, Jim," said Jesse to Jim Cummins, who was watching the detective.

"Yes."

"Can't we do him up?"

"Not now."

"The crowd act as if they were a body guard."

"They do."

"I wish he was alone."

"Let's shoot him."

"That would be folly."

"Wouldn't we get away?"

"No. Besides, we have too much at stake now."

"The gold in the hull of the John J. Roe?"

"Yes, and they are to take more from St. Louis for the mint at New Orleans."

The three men watched Dick until he went into the house, and then they retired.

"Aha! we've got him now," said Jesse, as they went away from the hotel. "Now, let's go to a saloon, or some place where we can get a table to ourselves, and talk it over."

"I am in favor of it," Jim Cummins answered.

"Come on."

There was a low saloon on the next block, and they went to it, and got a table in a far corner, where, by talking in low tones, there was no danger of being overheard.

"Now, boys, the Black Cloud is all right," said Jesse. "She ran a narrow risk on that raft last night, but there is not a tiny strain in her. She's ten miles below waiting for our reinforcements under Cole Younger, which will be here to-morrow. She will be ready to cope with the John J. Roe. Now, to get rid of this man Dick Wright. He registered here as he did at Hanni-

John White. I know his room, and I propose that we burn the house."

"Burn the house!" cried Jim Cummins.

"Yes, and him with it."

"How?"

"Easy. I have some inflammable oil that will burn like powder. Get a syringe full and squirt it through a keyhole or transom into his room, light a match and drop it in, and it will go off with an explosion. In a moment the whole room will be ablaze, and he will be suffocated before he can possibly get out."

"The plan is an excellent one. It will work to perfection," said Bill.

"Then what'll we do, Jess?" asked Jim.

"Get to our tug and watch for the John J. Roe. The moment she leaves her pier we will be in her wake, and with our recruits we haven't much fear. I am going aboard of her, and I'll take Bob Gatlin along."

"But you were discovered before."

"Yes; but I'll disguise anew."

"Who is Bob Gatlin?"

"A new recruit who used to be a pilot on the lower Mississippi."

"Can he be trusted?"

"Trusted! Why, if any one of us can, he can. Bob's got over a dozen indictments against him for almost every crime on the calendar, from petit larceny to murder, from working on Sunday to treason. No, he won't go back on us, for his own safety is in our company. But Bob is an experienced pilot, and he has applied for and got the position of pilot on the boat. Now, when we are down in the lower part of the country among the swamps and lagoons of the Mississippi we can attack her and have our own time and way in the robbery."

"You are right, Jesse. What a grand fellow you are to plan. You ought to have been a general, indeed you ought."

"Well, now, the next thing is the destruction of this detective."

Jesse took out the syringe which he had procured and the bottle of inflammable liquid. He examined them to see that they were all right, and said, "Come on."

Dick Wright, as the reader will remember, had lost a great deal of sleep during the last few days, and when he reached his room had scarcely sat down on the sofa before he fell into a doze.

The night advanced, and he heard not the footsteps in the hall.

Someone stopped, but he heard them not. The falling of liquid squirted through the keyhole did not awaken him.

Bill Chadwell climbed up on a chair, and lighting a match, threw it through the transom. A loud puff was heard as the match ignited, and immediately followed the crackling of flames.

Having fastened the door by tying the knob with a rope to the bannister, so it could not be pulled open, the James Boys ran down the stairs.

Dick Wright heard the loud puff-like explosion of powder in open air, and started up to find his apartment in flames. Already his bed was a mass of fire.

He uttered a shout and made a leap to the door, but he could not pull it open. The air was hot and stifling. The door was a mass of flames, and he was almost suffocated.

"Help, help, help!" he shrieked, and clasping his hands to his temples he fell backward on the floor of the burning room insensible.

CHAPTER XX.

TYING UP.

Dick's wild shriek for help was heard by a brave porter at the hotel. He ran to the door, gave it a kick with his foot, smashed it open, and burst into the room.

Almost blinded by smoke, heat and flame, he started back. But a moment later he saw a dark object lying on the floor but a few paces away. No fear of fire or death could stop the gallant fellow now. He plunged forward, seized Dick's insensible form in his arms, and dragged him out of danger into the hall.

Seizing a pitcher of water he dashed some of its contents in his face and hurried with him down the stairway.

The house was now all on fire. The flames spread rapidly, and the wildest confusion prevailed. Dick was taken into an alley in the crowd. The porter had taken the precaution to throw a wet blanket over him to keep the heat from further blistering him.

This prevented the James Boys, even if they were lurking near, from seeing him.

When Dick Wright recovered he was in a barn, and bending over him was the porter.

"Who brought me here?" Dick asked.

"I did," said the porter.

"Did anyone else see me?"

"No, for I covered ye with a blanket."

The moment Dick Wright regained his consciousness his shrewd eyes returned, and he said:

"Don't tell anyone that you rescued a man from the burning house."

"Why?"

"I want to have perished."

"What?" asked the man.

"I must be dead. Here is fifty dollars; now keep still. I died up there in that house."

The porter smiled, and said:

"I know."

Next morning the papers contained a long article of "Another Horror." One man had burned to death in a hotel down near the water.

Disguised as a swell young dandy from the East, the detective made his way to the boat.

He did not come to register or go on a voyage, but to see a friend, he stated.

He managed during the day to see Ethel Elliott and give her a note which explained that her friend would be near, and that she should believe nothing she heard.

The evening newspaper stated that the man who had lost his life in the house was a detective.

The Post Dispatch, that wide-awake, enterprising journal of St. Louis, had been able to get his name, which was Dick Wright.

A letter to Dick's friends, stating that he still lived, caused them to dry their tears.

The James Boys read of Dick's death with great satisfaction.

"We are done with him now," said Jesse James. "I am going aboard the John J. Roe to-morrow just before she pulls out, disguised as a Southern planter. Bob Gatlin is already aboard, and the rest of you can follow."

"Is Cole Younger with the recruits?"

"Yes, twenty miles below here. You will see a small flag waving on the right bank of the river as you go down."

"Yes."

"Land there and wait until midnight."

"When shall we start?" asked Gell Miller.

"Now."

The tug pulled out at once, and Jesse went ashore.

Next morning before the John J. Roe left her pier for her long voyage down the river, there came aboard a man who in dress and manner was distinctively Southern. He wore a thick, heavy cloak about his shoulders, and a broad-brimmed hat. He had short, close-trimmed beard and long hair, and his manner was that of a man who had millions at his command.

He was decidedly Southern in appearance.

He recorded his name as Mr. Rhody Shields, of New Orleans.

"A planter?" said the clerk.

"Yes."

"Going through to New Orleans?"

"Yes."

Then the non-communicative Southerner turned away and wandered aft.

"Hello," thought Jesse, "there is that old man whom I mistook for the detective."

Mr. Lamuel Bates, the old gentleman with white hair and snowy beard, was standing by the rail leaning upon it and looking carelessly toward the city.

"I won't try to engage him in conversation now," thought Jesse. "He'll never recognize me in this disguise."

The old man turned about and walked slowly forward, and gave the newcomer a momentary stare.

That evening at supper the bandit king found the old man at his side.

"Do you go far?" he asked, in the warm, informal way of a Southerner.

"As far as New Orleans."

"Oh, yes. You live there?"

"Near there."

"I rather thought you were a planter."

"Oh, yes, everybody who ever sees me knows that I am a planter."

"Right you are, stranger, for you have all the look and manner of a planter."

Jesse was well pleased at the old fellow's remark.

"Now I always thought I was a good actor," he said. "I believe I would have made more money on the stage than robbing trains, banks and steamboats."

Then the conversation turned on the South, and both agreed on everything.

"In what business are you engaged, Mr. Bates?" Jesse asked, to see if the old man would tell the same story he had told before.

"I am connected with the United States mint."

Dick Wright was too shrewd to be caught in any such a game. Having worked out the course he was to go, he determined to follow it.

The steamer continued on her voyage without any incident worthy of mention.

Poor Ethel Elliott had waited and waited for some sign of John

White, but he had not appeared. One evening as Mr. Bates, who was kind and fatherly to her, sat talking with her, she said:

"I wish I knew whether he was coming on this voyage."

"Who?"

"John White."

"Oh, the young man?"

"Yes, sir."

"He promised to be near you, did he not?"

"Yes, sir."

"He will keep his promise."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I am. Rest content. He is never far away. You may not see him, but you will always have him close to you."

"Then I shall be content," she answered, and he left her.

Mr. Rhody Shields, the Southerner, made the acquaintance of Miss Elliott before they had been three days on the voyage, and did his utmost to make himself attractive to her.

"We have the promise, Miss Elliott, of a fine voyage," he said one evening, approaching her as she stood on the deck of the boat gazing off at the river bank.

"Yes, sir."

"I hope you enjoy it."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you live in New Orleans?"

"I shall, sir."

"You haven't lived there in the past?"

"No, sir; my home has been in Missouri, near Hannibal, with my aunt. But my aunt died, and I am now going to live with my uncle."

"Ah, you will enjoy the southern city!"

"Do you live there?"

"Oh, yes. But how did you like Missouri?"

"Very well."

"You have the James Boys up there, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you did. I have heard much of them. Did you ever meet them?"

"Once."

"Where?"

"I was traveling on the Chicago and Alton Railroad when they robbed it."

"Did they rob you?"

"Yes, sir. They took from me a gift that was very precious."

"What was it?"

"A locket."

"Locket!"

"Yes, sir. A locket my mother gave me. It had the picture of my mother and father, and the only particle of mother's hair I have."

"Why did they take it?"

"Because it was gold, and had sets of diamonds."

After a long silence, during which time the man calling himself Rhody Shields heaved several sighs, he said:

"Well, young lady, it was a shame."

"A great shame, sir. They could have the gold and diamonds, if they would only return to me the pictures of my father and mother, and my mother's hair."

"Yes, they ought to do it."

Then he went to his stateroom, and took out from his valise a gold locket with sets of diamonds, and it had the picture of a middle-aged man and woman, and lock of iron gray hair.

The boat had passed Memphis and the line of Tennessee. It was now in the State of Mississippi.

On either side of the river were low-lying lands, bogs, marshes and swamps.

The fog lay thick on the river, and a cold mist of rain had been falling all day.

Evening was coming on, and the boat had been making but slow progress.

"Captain Asbury, are you going to run to-night?" asked Rhody Shields.

"Oh, yes."

"It's very dark to-night."

"The river is wide."

"But full of sawyers and snags. Are you not afraid you will run on one and sink your craft?"

"We have an experienced pilot."

"You had better leave it all to his judgment."

"To a certain extent we will."

Then Rhody Shields went aft. It was already growing dark, and the fog and dampness seemed increasing every moment.

Rhody discovered before him the pilot, and going to him, after giving a careful look all about to see that no one was in sight or ear-shot, said:

"Bob."

"Tall low, John, or they'll hear you."

"Bob, are you to pilot to-night?"

"Yes."

"Well, tie her up."

"Why?"

"We are in the right spot to do the work, Bob. Now tie her up and when the fires are gone out you can cut all the ropes and let her drift down to the island below, where our boys are waiting to do the work. Tell the captain it's too dark to go any further to-night, and he'll believe you."

"All right."

"And, Bob, you cut her loose when all is quiet."

"All right."

"Don't fail to tie her up."

Bob assured him he would.

Now, Dick Wright, who as Mr. Lem Bates had been making the acquaintance of nearly everybody on the boat, had his suspicions aroused on seeing the man, Rhody Shields, and the pilot talking.

Later at night, when the John J. Roe was tied up, he went to Captain Asbury and asked:

"Captain, why was the boat tied up?"

"Because the pilot said it was too dark to go on."

"Captain?"

"Well, sir?"

"I don't like your pilot."

"Maybe you don't like your captain?"

"Yes, I do, but that pilot will bear watching, Captain Asbury."

The captain merely laughed and turned away.

"Very well, I will keep watch over the boat myself," said Dick Wright.

CHAPTER XXI.

DICK'S SHOT.

"Can I see you a moment?"

Ethel Elliott had been sitting for some time on the sofa in the ladies' parlor, trying to while away the tedious hours by reading a novel.

The boat had been tied up and everybody said they would have to wait there until morning, as it was too dark for them to continue their voyage.

She looked up from the pages of the book which she had been reading, and saw standing before her the old man who had been her friend.

"You want to talk with me?" she asked.

"I do for a moment."

"Alone?"

"Where no one can see or hear us."

"Very well, come with me to my stateroom."

She rose, and he touched her arm.

"No, it would excite the attention of some one if we went together," said the old man. "Do you go, and I will come on later."

She understood now that there was something quite serious the matter, and her cheek grew pale.

"Don't be alarmed," he whispered. "It is not so bad perhaps, as you think, and remember that one in whom you ought to have confidence said he would be near you in your hour of peril."

"Yes, but he is not near. I have not seen him."

"I will talk with you of him when I see you alone."

She hurried away to her stateroom in no little anxiety, and there waited for her visitor.

She had not long to wait. The tap announced a visitor, and opening the door, she admitted the old, gray-haired man.

After carefully closing the door and fastening it, he sat down on a chair in front of her and said:

"I am going to make a revelation now to you, and you must not scream. I have been deceiving you all along—I am not what I seem."

Then he removed the wig and white beard. When he had done so she looked at him and said:

"Oh, it was you, was it, John White?"

"I am he whom you know as John White, but my name is not White."

She started up with a look of indignation, and said:

"Why did you deceive me?"

"I am a detective," he explained. "I am chasing the James Boys, and have them afloat. I had to change my name to deceive them, for I am too well known as Dick Wright to go under that name."

"What, are you Dick Wright?"

"I am."

"Pinkerton's celebrated detective?"

"I am his detective, and you can, if you choose, add celebrity to it."

"Well, well, I understand it all now," she said, taking his hand. "I did not dream you were a young man. I thought that Dick Wright must be old to be so experienced and brave as he is reported being."

"Age is not necessary to courage. I believe that a young man or boy is braver than one older, and in my business one can have a world of experience in an incredibly short time. But I have no time to talk further now. I wanted to tell you that affairs are coming to a crisis."

"What do you mean?"

"Before morning I cannot tell what may happen. Be prepared for the worst."

"Do you think we are in danger?"

"I fear so. That pilot is a villain. He had us tied up here for some purpose. I tried to persuade the captain not to allow the fire to die out of the furnace, and keep steam in the boilers, but he won't believe there is any danger. I must bid you good-by now," and he began to don his false hair and beard, and make up as the old man he pretended to be.

"Where are you going?"

"Up on top."

"What for?"

"To remain on watch all night."

"Why do you stay on watch?"

"For villainy. There is a superabundance of it going on about to-night. Now, whatever may come," said Dick, "have no fears but that I will always be near you."

"I believe you now. I feel ashamed that I ever doubted you," she answered.

Then he went out and ascended to the deck.

He saw two forms pretty well forward talking together.

It was very dark, and he could not quite make them out, but he was sure one of them was the pilot.

"Now, if Jesse James is aboard this boat at all, he is in the disguise of that Southern man who calls himself Rhody Shields," Dick thought.

He coughed slightly, in order to arouse the attention of the two men.

Immediately they looked about, and the pilot hurried below.

Then Dick took out his handkerchief, blew his nose and put it in his pocket. (His handkerchief, not his nose.)

"They are up to some mischief," Dick thought. "He went down to consult with Rhody Shields. I know it, and now the next thing will be to make some other plan."

Dick resolved to keep up his post on deck.

Bob Gotlin was not long in finding Jesse James when he reached the main cabin. Jesse saw at a glance that something had gone wrong, and seeing that Bob wanted to speak with him, he signed him to follow and walked out on the stern deck, just aft of the ladies' cabin.

Bob followed.

"Well, Bob?" Jesse whispered, as he joined him, "what is wrong now?"

"I can't do it."

"Cut the cables?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He's up there."

"That old fellow?"

"Yes."

"Can't you get rid of him?"

"No."

"Do it when his eyes are off you."

"His eyes are never off me."

"Watching?"

"Yes."

"His suspicions must be roused."

"They are."

"Well, that's bad."

"It's very bad."

"The thing has got to be done Bob. The boys are waiting."

"I know it."

"The cables must be cut and the rockets sent up."

"Well, how am I to get rid of him?"

"Let me see."

Jesse James leaned against the rail, and his cunning brain contracted his brow in thought. Jesse was a great schemer, and he seldom set to work on some plan but that he made the plan work.

"Bob?" he said at last.

"Yes."

"We must get him down here."

"Down?"

"Yes."

"How can we?"

"I will do it. Now, are you sure the steam is exhausted?"

"Yes."

"Quite sure."

"There isn't ten pounds in the boilers."

"Could they get it up in time?"

"No. They could not have steam up for an hour and a half or two hours."

"That's good. Then we'll do it at once. Go down and bring up a deck hand that wants to earn twenty dollars right easy."

"They all want to."

Bring up one who is shrewd, and won't ask too many questions."

"All right."

He hurried away, and soon came back with a fellow who was named Ben Rice.

"Ben, here is twenty dollars—now keep still," said Jesse. "I want you to go up to the hurricane deck and there you will see the old fellow whom you have seen ever since we began our voyage. Lem Bates is his name."

"Yes, sir," said Ben, grinning.

"Tell him that a young lady wants to see him, that Miss Ethel Elliott wants to see him right away."

"Yes, sir."

"Now go. Tell him she sent you."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't you mention anybody else but her. She sent you, mind you, and no one else."

"Yes, sir."

"Go now."

Ben was gone; then Jesse James turned to Bob, and said:

"Now, Bob, the moment he comes down run up and do it."

"You can just bet I will," said Bob.

He took his place near the companion ladder and waited.

Dick was still on guard, when Ben came to him and told him the young lady, Miss Ethel Elliott, had sent for him to come to her at once.

Dick was completely deceived. Any request that Ethel Elliott had to make he would of course grant.

"I will just run down and tell her," he thought, "and come right back."

He had reached the cabin deck, when he caught sight of the pilot running up to the deck he had quitted, on the other side. Immediately the idea of a trick suggested itself to Dick, and wheeling about he ran back.

Bob had cut six cables before he came.

As Dick gained the deck he cut the last one that held the boat to the shore.

Quick as a flash the detective drew a revolver and fired.

The pilot gave utterance to a yell, staggered back, and fell overboard, shot through the head.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ATTACK AND CAPTURE.

In a moment the wildest confusion reigned. The shriek and yell had been heard, and the captain and a dozen men rushed to the deck.

"What's the matter?" cried Captain Asbury.

"A clear case of manslaughter in self-defense, captain," said the white-haired old man. "There is not a jury in the world would call it murder."

"What does it mean?"

"I just got here in time to see the villain cut one of our cables, but thank fortune we have half a dozen more good strong ropes to hold us fast."

"The boat is moving!" cried some one.

"We are adrift!"

Dick Wright ran forward, and to his dismay discovered that all the cables were cut.

Coming up to the deck at this moment, Jesse James saw and realized what had been done. His pilot had been killed.

Quick as a flash he drew a revolver and leveled it at the white-haired man, crying:

"Dick Wright, I know you now. Cunning as you are, you shall die!"

But at this instant a fair, white hand struck up his arm, and the bullet whistled away harmlessly into air.

Jesse saw his danger in a moment. It was Miss Ethel Elliott who had struck up the pistol and saved Dick's life. But a gentleman passenger who was by knocked Jesse's revolver from his hand.

"Arrest that man," cried Dick Wright, in a voice of thunder.

He ran at Jesse, but with a hoarse, defiant laugh the bandit darted below—down, down to the boiler deck, and leaping into a small row-boat which he had placed in readiness for sudden escape, he cut it loose from the steamer and pulled out into the fog and darkness.

A wild, mocking laugh, like the laugh of a fiend, came out of the blackness of the night.

Captain Asbury was amazed, dazed and confused at the strange incidents, all of which had occurred in less than three minutes' time. Turning to Dick, he asked:

"What does it mean?"

Concealment longer was useless, and tearing off his disguise, he said:

"I am Dick Wright, the detective, and that man is Jesse James. The one shot was an accomplice. We are now drifting down the river, and will soon be at the mercy of the banditti, who are lying below us. I have no doubt, waiting for us to run down. Get up steam at once, and I will signal to my own men to come on with their tug to our defense."

Everything possible was done to get up steam and save the boat, but it was useless. Before the water in the great boilers began to boil they were beached on an island.

Wild yells came from the shore, showing the exultation of the pirates.

"It's no use, captain," said one gentleman. "I tell you it's no use. We can't successfully defend ourselves against such fearful odds."

"No, we had better surrender," said another.

"Never surrender," cried the brave old captain. "Why should we surrender?"

"Why resist? We'll be shot down without mercy," said Mr. Willis, the passenger.

"There is a chance for us, if we defend the boat," began Dick Wright.

"You have no wife and children aboard," cried Willis. "If you did you would look at it in a different light."

Despite the opposition of the passengers, a dozen men were got together and armed.

Dick spoke a few words with Ethel, telling her he would protect her to the last, and then gave his whole attention to the bloody conflict which was expected at early dawn.

He strove by every means in his power to instill some courage into them, but Falstaff never led a more cowardly gang to conflict.

They were trembling with dread all night long. When morning came the sun dispersed the clouds and fog, and the wild, desolate island and swampy forests on every side made the picture more terrible than it had seemed to the imagination.

The captain had got up steam during the night, and tried to back off the sand-bar; but it was useless. He was too firmly aground, and nothing but a rise in the river would float him.

Suddenly from around a point of land there came the low, ugly little tug, her deck actually black with men. Her guns had been changed to the bow, and the grim pirates, with Winchester rifles, could be seen everywhere.

As she rounded the point of land half a mile or more away, a wreath of white smoke curled up from her bow, and a moment later a four-pound ball came skipping over the water, passing but a few feet to the larboard of the steamboat.

Dick Wright had succeeded in mustering twenty men to the forward deck, but at the report of the cannon half of them threw down their arms and began to implore mercy of the advancing pirates.

Jesse James stood in the bow of the tug and waved a red flag, and then a white one.

As he came a little nearer he said:

"If you will all surrender you shall not be harmed. I never kill save in self-defense; but if you resist, I shall turn my cannon on your boat, and you will have to look out for women and children. I have thirty men, all armed with rifles, pistols and cutlasses, and I can assure you resistance is folly. I only want the treasure aboard, not your lives."

"It's no use to fight," said the captain.

"Don't believe him!" cried Dick.

But Dick was powerless. The pirates came on, and when the detective vowed he would fight to the death, he was seized by half a dozen frantic passengers, disarmed and held until Jesse James came aboard with his crew.

"You are my captive now," he said, placing his hand on Dick's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DICK'S ESCAPE FROM THE ISLAND.

Not a shot was fired, not a blow struck in defense.

Such a terrible name had the James Boys gained all over the world, that at the very sound of it the stoutest turned pale and trembled.

"Now, Mr. Dick Wright, I will attend to your case soon!" said Jesse James, his frame trembling with hate.

"Mr. James," said Captain Asbury, "remember your promise that you would harm no one if we surrendered."

"My promise never extended to him," said Jess. "He shot down one of my men in cold blood last night, and he shall not escape."

Dick knew it was useless for him to plead in his own defense. His hands were firmly tied behind his back, and he stood without opening his mouth, gazing on the men before him.

Dick was placed under a guard of four, two of whom were the men Tump and Jake, whom we have met before, and the other recruit Cole Younger had brought with him from Missouri.

"Keep a close watch on him," was Jesse's command. "Don't give him any show to escape."

He was placed in the stern seat of a steamboat yawl, and two of the pirate guard seized oars, while the other two sat facing Dick, with guns in their hands.

"If yer budge, I'll shoot yer!" said one.

Dick made no answer.

They landed, and the prisoner turned his eyes toward the boat. They were taking all the prisoners on shore preparatory to searching for the vast treasure which Jesse James believed was on board.

"Come on, yer can't stand hyar any longer," growled Tump, pushing the unfortunate prisoner away before him.

"Go 'long—go 'long!"

There was no alternative but to obey, and Dick without a word walked down a forest path.

The day passed miserably enough. The prisoner was kept in an old, tumble-down cabin, doubtless erected for some hunters. All day long he kept asking himself what caused the delay of his men.

"They've stranded on some bar or been wrecked during the late terrible fog," was his conclusion.

He never once entertained an idea that fear could have anything to do with their detention.

The James Boys had been sadly deluded by the capture of the John J. Roe.

It proved after all to be no treasure ship. Outside of a few thousand belonging to the Southern Express Company, and the money and valuables of the passengers, the boat had nothing aboard to repay them for their weeks of ceaseless, anxious watching.

"I told you so," said Frank James. "The fabulous wealth for the New Orleans mint has been only a delusion. What are we to do now? A pretty mess we've got into!"

"Never mind, Frank. It's here yet."

"What?"

"The treasure."

"You are crazy."

"That captain knows where it is."

"Captain Asbury?"

"Yes."

"Well, if he does you won't get it out of him. Tear up the boat board by board and plank by plank."

"Before we could do that we would have the United States Navy after us. No, we must do something more speedy."

"What?"

"Make the captain tell us in what part of the boat the treasure is concealed."

"How?"

"By torture."

After a moment's reflection Frank approved the idea. It was dark when the bandit brothers approached the captain and demanded that he tell them where the treasure in gold coin and bullion which he was conveying to the United States mint at New Orleans was concealed in the boat.

The captain protested that he never had had such treasure aboard, which was the truth, but was answered by the assurance that he would be roasted alive if he didn't tell them.

He could not.

He was taken to a stove, and the prisoners, realizing what was about to take place, began to howl and scream.

The noise was heard where Dick was guarded by four of the buccaneers, some distance away.

They grew uneasy at the sounds, and leaving him in charge of two, the other two hastened away to ascertain what caused the noise.

Dick Wright had been carefully slipping the cord on his wrist. His wrist was large and hand small, and he had long practiced the trick known to legerdemain performers of untying knots.

It was dark in the tumble-down cabin, and he had the knot untied. Then to untie his feet unseen was but the work of a moment.

His two guards stood with their backs toward him, their forms outlined in the dark.

He rose slowly and carefully measured the distance.

Whack, whack! fell two stunning blows on their heads, and both of them fell forward on their faces senseless. So silently had the blows been struck that one five rods away would have heard nothing. Dick possessed himself of their belts, containing ammunition and revolvers, and hurried from the cabin.

He ran to the shore, and ran along up the bank until he found a small boat with oars in it.

Leaping into it, he pulled out into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DETECTIVE IN THE SWAMP.

"Halt—stop!" cried a voice from shore.

Dick Wright, of course, paid no heed to the cry, and continued to pull away into the forest.

Bang!

Whiz! came a bullet by his head.

"What's the matter?"

It was the voice of Jesse James who, hearing the shot, was running down toward the shore from whence it came.

"He has escaped, Jess."

"Who, Frank?"

"The detective."

"Impossible! I left him with four guards."

"He's knocked two senseless."

"Where were the other two?" demanded Jesse, coming down to the beach.

"They had gone to see what all the uproar was about."

"I'll have 'em all hanged for this."

"What are we to do, Jesse?"

"Follow him."

"At once, of course."

"Yes, of course."

"Get a boat some of you—quick!"

One of the men who had been knocked down by Dick Wright in his escape now came up with the information that Dick was well armed, having taken the weapons of both of them.

"You'll have to be careful, or he'll get some of you," said Jesse.

"He's a dead shot, and he is desperate. Shoot him down at sight."

"Jess?"

"What, Frank?"

"Better postpone baking Captain Asbury, and both of us follow him."

"Who'll we leave in charge here?"

"Cole Younger."

"Well, Cole will do, he is brave and prudent."

"We must have another boat, Jesse. You take one and I the other."

"Bring another boat!" shouted Jesse.

"Better take the tug?" cried one of the pirates.

"No, two row-boats."

One of the buccaneers hurried away and secured a second boat.

"Now, Frank, take four men with rifles and revolvers, and strike out in that boat."

"You will follow in the next, Jesse?"

"Yes."

Frank ran down to the water's edge, and leaping in, called to Tump, Zeke and two others to spring in.

They did so.

"Have you all got guns?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead!"

"Jesse," Frank called, as he retreated in the darkness.

"Yes."

"If you follow, be careful about firing into us."

"We'll follow, have no fears. You do the same. We will know each other, I guess."

"Yes."

Then, as Frank sat down in the stern of the boat, he said to his oarsmen:

"Heave away, lads, we must not let him escape."

"Aye, aye!" they responded, as they bent to their oars.

"We'll swing for it if he gets away."

"Yes, we've know't," growled Zeke.

The boat fairly flew over the water, and the fog and darkness was so intense that they could not see any more than if they had been blind.

"Is there a lantern in the boat?" Frank asked.

"Yes, ye'll find it under the seat," old Zeke Denning answered.

Frank James felt under the seat, and drew out a lantern. Striking a match, he lighted it.

"This will do us a good service, boys," he said.

"Yes, if he don't see ter shoot us," answered Zeke.

"We must get the first shot."

They were pulling steadily away toward the west shore, when suddenly from the distance came a flash, a report, and a bullet shattered the lantern which Frank James, fortunately for himself, was holding over the side of the boat. After smashing the lantern, the bullet struck the side of the boat, making a streak where it cut the wood as it glanced away into the water.

It was a moment before Frank James could speak, for the shot produced a shock on his nervous system.

As soon as he could speak, however, he said:

"Lay to, boys, and let him have it," and raising his Winchester, began blazing away in the direction from whence the shot came.

His four companions seized their own guns, and opened a fusilade in the same direction.

And all this time how fared the bold detective, whose quick action, firm nerve, and cool head had enabled him to make one of the most remarkable escapes on record?

Dick Wright pulled straight into the darkness until he began to feel the swish of weeds and bushes under his boat.

Then he came to a halt and lay on his oars.

"I must be getting near the shore, and may find myself stuck in the mud before I know it," the detective thought. "Hello, what's that? The dip of oars, as I live!"

The measured dip of oars could be heard, and now through the fog and darkness he caught the gleam of the lantern. A lantern would give them an advantage, as they could see the shore and he could not.

Drawing a revolver, he fired a shot with the effect we have seen.

As soon as he pulled the trigger, he lay the pistol at his side and seized his oars once more, pulling with all his might.

Soon he was several rods from his position when he shot the lantern, and waited listening to the splash of bullets in his wake.

Slowly he pulled in toward shore, finding his way impeded by bushes and submerged grass. At last he came upon one of those singular growths common to the Mississippi swamps, and known as cypress knees.

"I am in a swamp," he thought, as he pulled his boat carefully about among the cypress knees.

He sounded the water, and found it not over two feet deep, with a mud bottom.

The detective could now hear his pursuers plainly.

"Who were you firing at, Frank?" Jesse James asked his brother.

"The detective," was the answer.

"Hit him?"

"Don't know. Have you a lantern, Jesse?"

"Yes."

"Light it."

"All right."

"Be careful, for he shot my lantern all to pieces."

Jesse James was too shrewd to hold the lantern himself, but passing it forward, told the man in the bow to hold it directly under the stern of the boat.

Then Jesse rose and cocked his rifle.

"If he shoots at that I'll get him!" he declared.

"Look sharp, Jess."

"I am."

Then a silence.

"We are near the swamp, are we not, Gates?" he said to a new recruit, who had lived in this country nearly all his life.

"Yes," Gates answered.

"Well, pull ahead. Steady there!"

The boats were now almost side by side, and but a few feet apart.

Frank also rose in the stern of his boat with a cocked Winchester rifle in his hands. The detective, far out in the swamp, could see them. He was in a close place. If he should shoot one of the James Boys, the flash of his pistol would only indicate to the others that he was before them, and he would be riddled with bullets and buckshot.

"Do you see him, Frank?" Jesse called to his brother in the other boat.

"No."

"Look sharp."

"I am."

"If you hear a sound on the water blaze away."

"We are in the swamp."

"Yes, and the cypress knees will make a good hiding place."

Dick saw the light approaching nearer.

The stump like trees with their short, thick vines were so dense as to make rowing through the muddy water extremely difficult in the dark.

He put out one oar and touching one of the cypress knees, gave himself a push through the water, sending his boat around another stumpy tree as the light came in view.

It was a close dodge.

Dick, finding rowing difficult, laid one oar in his boat. Despite all his care there was a slight noise, and instantly he heard Jesse James say:

"Aha, Frank, did you hear that?"

"I thought I heard a noise," Frank answered.

"I am quite sure of it."

"What was it like?"

"The laying down of an oar."

"Let us shoot at the sound."

"It's no use. I can see nothing to shoot at, and I don't believe in blazing away in the darkness."

Dick took up one oar and began poling his way through the water. The water was so shallow that he could easily touch bottom with his oar. So he pushed himself along through the damp, ooze-like water.

"We're driving him in," said Jesse James.

"Yes," Dick heard Frank answer.

"Now, Gates, how long is this swamp?"

"Several miles, sah," Gates answered.

"Is it covered with water all the way?"

"No, sah."

"Very well, we'll have him."

"No one lives in the swamps?"

"Some niggers, sah, but they can't help him. We'll have him like a rat in a trap befo' to-morrow night," and Dick Wright heard this assuring speech with a thrill of horror. It told only too well what he would have to undergo, and that escape was almost impossible, if not quite.

Dick's fears were fully realized, as we shall see.

CHAPTER XXV.

BLOODHOUNDS.

The bobbing lantern, darting in and out here and there, could occasionally be seen by the fugitive.

The water grew more muddy, shallower and more difficult to navigate.

He was being driven into the mud, and ere long must abandon his boat to wade or sink in the swamp.

He had grown doubly desperate, and determined if he must make that swamp his burial ground that Jesse and Frank James should go with him.

Again and again he was almost on the point of giving up, laying to, and when they came on him to sell his life as dearly as possible.

But the prudent man in him said:

"Press on, press on. You can yet make it."

And he pressed on. Hope, hope, the blessed comforter for all ills, still inspired him and he pushed the boat on.

At last, to his surprise, it struck against solid earth.

He felt the ground carefully with his oar to make sure that he could effect a landing without miring, and then sprang lightly from the boat.

He found the ground rising six or eight feet above the swamp at this place, and there were stones scattered all along it.

Then he climbed up among the bushes and waited a moment to listen. He had abandoned his boat, but he still carried one of the oars in his hand to feel his way through the darkness.

The dampness and fog over the swamp was almost oppressive, and the darkness intense. Then the sounds which pervaded the place were not calculated to stimulate one's spirits. The hoarse croak of the bullfrog, the shriek of the bittern, and the cry of the hawk were bad enough in themselves, but when added to them came the terrible bellow of the alligator, he felt the cold chills running over him. In the distance he could hear those amphibious monsters splashing and wallowing in the water as if they were enjoying this tropical night. Dick crouched down among some thick bushes, and as he listened intently to all the sounds about him, asked himself the question:

"How is it all to end?"

The pirate boats were compelled to move slowly through the water, for the cypress knees were so close together that they could in places barely squeeze through them. Then they had to take in their oars and pole the boats along.

"Keep right ahead." Jesse James could be heard saying. His unerring instinct seemed to guide him along in the right direction. "We'll run him down yet, see if we don't. Just keep up your course, lads, and we'll have him."

"Pull away there a little to the right," said Frank.

"Keep close to us, Frank," said Jesse.

"I will."

"Stand ready, for he is near."

A loud splash was heard off to the left.

"Ah, there he is!" said Frank.

"No, no, it was an alligator," answered Mr. Gates.

Gates being thoroughly acquainted with the swamps, his judgment in the matter was taken as good.

"Push ahead! Hello, what's that?" cried Jesse, as the little mound came in sight.

"One o' the high places in the swamp," said Gates.

"And there's a boat, Jesse!" cried Frank.

"It's his boat."

"We've got him now."

"Push in ashore, boys!"

Bang!

A flash and stunning report above was accompanied by a bullet.

Jesse James felt a sudden pain, as if a hot iron had been drawn across the side of his head.

He staggered as he fired, and would have fallen, had not some one caught him and lowered him to the seat.

Crack! crack! crack! went three rifle shots in quick succession to the hillock.

Frank James stopped firing, and as the echoes of the shots rolled away into the swamp he asked:

"Who was hit?"

"Yer brother!" cried Gates.

"Killed?"

"No."

It was Jesse who answered.

"Bad hurt, Jess?"

"Only a scratch. Ashore, everybody, and up the hill!"

The boats ran in to the steep bank, but the detective did not wait for them to land. He ran away through the dense woods.

It was a fearful flight, and can better be imagined than described. Sometimes he found the ground sinking until it came almost to the swamp. Sometimes he was wading through water, or blindly leaping in the dark from tussock to tussock, frequently getting a fall in the muddy water.

"There he is—fire!" cried Jesse, as Dick took one of his tumbles in the mud and water.

Then came a rattling crash of fire arms, and the bullets flew like hail over the spot where the detective was lying.

He crawled away and tried to double on them.

He turned and went backward, and they went ahead.

They were soon aware of the dodge he had played on them, and turning about, scattered in different directions.

It was all to no effect, however. They did not find him.

Although he had succeeded in eluding them, Dick's condition was miserable enough.

He was never out of hearing of his pursuers.

Could he have seen, he might possibly have eluded them, but constantly stumbling and splashing in the water told them where he was.

He at last reached a dry little nook, thickly covered with bitter thorn, and crept in under the bushes to lie down and rest.

He had not been there long before he heard his pursuers.

They halted within ear-shot, and one of them said:

"Let us sit down and rest, for I am about worn out."

"So am I."

"This constant tramp, tramping through the mud and swamp is too much for me."

"Me too."

"Well, boys," said Jesse, "we'll sit down and rest a bit, if you can find a dry place in which to sit."

"It seems to me, Jess, that we're not going to overhaul him," said Bill Chadwell.

"When daylight comes we'll have a better chance."

"And so will he."

"But we'll spread out and take him in."

"Bear in mind that when you spread your net out to catch Dick Wright you are not seining for a sucker."

"What do you mean, Bill?"

"I mean that if you think you can divide up your forces and take him in, you are running a very dangerous risk. He'll whip them in detail."

"So he will," said another.

"Well, what are we to do? I wish I had bloodhounds. I would hunt him down with them."

"I've got six," said Gates.

"Six bloodhounds?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At home, not five miles away."

"How long will it take to bring them here?"

"Two hours."

"That will be about daylight?"

"Yes."

"Go and get them. Take one boat and four men."

"I'll go right away."

Dick heard this command and response.

This meant danger to him.

He rose on his hands and knees, crawled through the thorns, fearfully lacerating his skin and clothes.

A little distance away he rose and walked.

All the remainder of the night he traveled, he knew not in what direction.

Day dawned, and he was beyond the swamp.

He was on solid ground in that interminable forest which extends beyond it. He was suffering from hunger and fatigue, but there was not a house in the wilderness where he might get food and rest.

Suddenly on the air there came a strange, blood-curdling sound.

"The bloodhounds!" cried the detective. He had paused a moment to rest, but now he started to his feet and ran on, but the baying came nearer and nearer every moment.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BOILING SPRING.

For the first time in his life, Dick Wright began to almost despair. With despair came a determination to die fighting.

"I can go no further," he said. "It is only to be run down and devoured by dogs at last, and I will face them here rather than retreat further."

Near him was a short oak tree, with its branches spreading out in every direction.

Dick went to the tree, and weak, sore and bruised as he was, he could scarcely make his way up into the tree.

He had scarcely got in the fork and braced himself well there, before the first of the bloodhounds, with loud, deafening bay, came bounding at him.

The branches of the tree were so low that Dick was but a little distance beyond reach of the ferocious monsters.

He leaned downward, and pointing a revolver at the head of one of the dogs, pulled the trigger.

Bang! went the shot, and the beast rolled over with a bullet in the brain. The others ran away a short distance, barked and howled, and came back to the tree.

Bang! went a second shot, and another dog rolled over dead.

Only four remained.

Dick could hear the banditti coming, and he wanted to be ready for them.

He could fight better on the ground than in the tree, and he determined, before they came up, to dispose of the remaining four dogs.

He shot two more in quick succession, and broke the shoulder of the fifth so he ran howling away.

The sixth leaped at him with such fury that the muzzle of Dick's revolver was thrust almost in his mouth before he pulled the trigger. The explosion followed, and though the dog fell back dead, he pulled Dick to the ground.

One revolver was emptied, but the detective had another.

He was somewhat stunned by the fall, and the banditti burst forth from the wood upon him just as he began to rise.

He was still on his knees, but drawing his second revolver, he leveled it at Jesse's heart, and pulled the trigger. Only a dull click came in response. Again and again he pulled the trigger with like result. All the cartridges had by some means become damp and useless.

"Ha, ha, ha! I've got you now!" cried Jesse.

"Let me settle him!" said Frank.

"No, don't shoot."

Frank's revolver was already raised, when Jesse James caught his arm, crying:

"Don't shoot!"

"Why?"

"We'll have a little amusement with him."

Calling up all the strength he possessed, Dick staggered to his feet.

"Come on!" he cried, clubbing his pistol.

"Don't kill him, boys," said Jesse.

Then with a shout all rushed at him.

It was only the work of a moment, and the unequal fight was over.

Dick was knocked down and tied hard and fast.

"Aha, we have you at last!" said Jesse.

"He was a tough one, Jess," put in Frank.

"Yes."

"Has a constitution like a mule."

"Good for us his cartridges were wet. Some one would have gone under."

"He has done for my fine Cuban bloodhounds," growled Gates.

"I want to kill him."

"All in good time."

"Don't monkey around about it, Jess, until he gets away again," said Bill Chadwell.

They were tired, and the prisoner could scarcely walk.

As he was half dragged and frequently kicked along the way, Jesse James said to him:

"Dick, you are shrewd."

"Thank you."

"You are brave."

"That's a compliment."

"You are a good fellow, Dick, and I kind of like you."

"I am sorry I can't reciprocate the feeling."

"But, Dick, well as I like you, I have a very singular and painful duty to perform. Can't you guess what it is?"

"I suppose hang me."

"Oh, no, Dick. I think too much of you for that, Dick. I shall never allow them to put a rope around your neck."

"Then do you mean to shoot me?"

"No."

"Drown me, of course, for you intend to dispose of me some way."

"Well, not exactly that way, Dick. Though, as you say, I must dispose of you some way, yet it could hardly be drowning. Now, you would like to know in what way you are to shake off this mortal coil, wouldn't you, Dick?"

"Yea."

"Of course you would. It's only natural that you should be interested in the matter. Well, Dick, be real good, and I will tell you. Yes, tell you all about it, and you must then admit that I have hit upon a model way of disposing of a very dear friend. I intend to boil you."

"What?" gasped Dick.

"Boil you. Easily done. There is a spring ahead of us in which the water is boiling hot. They say a man can't live in it many seconds. That while it is cooler at the surface, it boils at the bottom. Now, Dick, you have been very persistent in following us—I suppose to avenge the death of your brother-in-law, John Wicher, whom we were forced to kill because he sought to make our acquaintance. Well, we don't want to be rude in our execution, or get rid of you hastily. We'll tie you snugly with ropes and let you down gradually into the hot water."

"You won't die in a hurry; you'll have time to think over the past, and make any disposition you may have to make of your worldly effects. You'll be scalded slowly. Boiled a little bit at a time."

Dick shuddered, but he opened not his mouth.

He resolved not to beg for mercy, for it would only delight the fiends.

The boiling spring was reached at last, and his arms were pinned close to his sides, so he could not move them, and bound close to his body.

A tree grew close to the boiling spring, and one of the banditti climbed out upon a projecting branch of the tree and placed a rope over it.

One end was passed in a loop under the prisoner's arms, and the bandits took hold of the other end.

Jesse stood on the bank and watched the proceedings.

"Lower him gradually so he can get the full benefit of the boiling water," said Jesse James, and the fiends holding the rope began to let the detective down.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOSS OF THE PIRATE TUG.

The detective was lowered until his feet touched the scalding water beneath. He kicked violently and struggled.

"Let him down, let him down!" cried Jesse James. "Why don't you let him down?"

"The rope has caught in the branch above, and won't slip," said one.

Boom!

A cannon shot struck in their midst and scattered pieces of gravel and earth in every direction.

"What's that?"

Boom! another shot.

Two men were struck down. Others were in flight.

Then came around a bayou the little steam tug, with John Flynn and Joe Taylor in the bow, and a dozen men armed with Winchesters behind them. They opened fire on the pirates, and they fled.

Jesse and Frank James saw that all hope was gone now.

"Hold!" cried Jesse. "Let me kill him first," and he leveled his rifle at the swaying figure above the hot spring.

At this moment a bullet cut away the hammer of his gun, and the bandit, with a terrible yell, wheeled and fled.

The steam tug ran in under the detective, who, beyond a good steaming, had suffered no injury.

He was cut down, and landed on the deck of his boat.

"Put right about, John—quick!" he cried.

"What has happened?"

"Get into the river, quick as you can, and make all speed for the first island below, and I will tell you on the way."

As soon as they were in the river and steaming down toward the island, Dick Wright told how the steamer John J. Roe had been captured by the James Boys, who had added a gang of river pirates to their force. He told how he had managed to make his escape to the swamp, but that the boat's captain, crew and passengers were in great peril.

"Now, John, why haven't you followed my instructions?"

"We did as far as we could," said John.

"But you didn't keep up with the boat."

"We got on a sand-bar and laid there for two days before the river rose enough to float us."

"Hurry, hurry!" cried Dick. "If we don't get there before Jesse and Frank James do they may all be butchered."

"Put on every pound of steam she will bear!" said John to the engineer.

"There they go now," said Dick.

"Who?"

"Frank and Jesse James. See them hurrying across to the river in the skiff just pulling out of the bayou. Here, your best gunner. Hit that boat. Shoot as if your life depended on it."

The two gunners sprang to one of the little cannon, which had

been loaded with a solid shot. It was aimed and fired. A tremendous splash in the water almost beneath the bow of the James Boys' skiff, caused them to wheel about and put back to the swamp.

"Now for the island!"

"I see it."

"I see the boat stranded."

"There are the pirates."

"Where's their tug, the Black Cloud?"

"There she lays, up close under shore," cried Dick. "Get me a glass—quick!"

The glass was brought, and Dick gave the pirate tug a quick glance, then, his face lighting up with joy, he cried:

"They haven't steam up. Put in, boys, and keep astern of her. Her guns are on her bow."

Like a meteor the detective's boat flew through the water.

The river pirates saw their danger, and some sprang to the tug, while others ran to the woods.

"Keep astern!" cried Dick. "Keep well astern and let her have it!"

The four-pound guns were loaded, shotted and pointed at the pirate craft.

"Fire!" cried Dick.

Two tremendous reports shook the detective's tug to its very centre, and while one of the balls crashed through the hull of the tug, the other cut the only cable that held it on shore, and allowed it to swing out into the river.

"Fire again. Keep well astern!" cried Dick, "and then she can't use her guns."

The pilot handled the officer's tug with admirable skill, and John Flynn and Joe Taylor proved no mean gunners. Shot after shot were poured into the stern of the pirate tug, cutting holes in her hull and riddling her cabin.

At last those on board found it too warm, and leaped overboard and swam toward the fast receding shore.

The tug, floating down the river a helpless wreck, was at last discovered to be on fire. Higher and higher leaped the wild flames, casting a lurid glare up over the water.

She floated past the stranded steamer, but fortunately not near enough to ignite her.

"The tug is on fire," said Dick to a sailor.

"Yes."

"Did they fire her?"

"They might have done it, but more than likely it was one of our shots struck her furnace, in which they were trying to build a fire, and scattered the fire over the boat."

"There, she drifts too far down now to do the John J. Roe any harm, and as the river is rising very rapidly, we may soon be able to get the steamboat afloat."

"I hope your predictions will prove correct, John. One thing is certain, the tug is doomed."

The tug drifted further and further down the stream, borne on by the current, until all danger to the stranded John J. Roe was lost, and Dick Wright said:

"Now, men, let us put in to shore. Arm yourselves with Winchester rifles and revolvers."

Fifteen or twenty of the river pirates could be seen rapidly throwing up a rifle pit of sand.

They lay behind it with their rifles ready.

"Boys," said Dick, "let drive at them with the four-pounders."

The two small cannons began to play on the fort, and the sand flew in every direction. Their hastily constructed breastwork evidently could not withstand the cannon.

"What are they doing now?" asked John.

"Bringing the prisoners from the boat to place in front, so we will have to shoot our friends," Dick answered.

"What will we do now?"

"We must land and carry their fort by storm," Dick answered.

At this moment a tremendous explosion was heard down the river, and the pirate tug was blown to atoms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

"What was that?" cried John Flynn, on hearing the awful report, and he turned his eyes down the river where smoke and fragments of the tug were seen flying in every direction.

"They had powder aboard," said Dick, and it has blown the tug to pieces."

"Well, we are done with it. Now, how are we to rescue our people on shore?"

"I will land with twelve men and charge them. You can take the others with the tug and keep out in the river so they cannot board."

Joe Taylor at once proceeded to select eleven men, and all, armed with Winchester rifles and revolvers, prepared to land.

"Joe, you are to be my lieutenant," said Dick.

"I will."

"Take your place on the left as soon as we land, and I will be on the right."

"Don't fear, we'll all be on hand."

"Then make ready."

The tug ran in close to a place where the bank was about four feet high, and the officers sprang on shore and began to form.

They were now about four or five hundred yards from the fortification, but the pirates in the ditches opened fire on them.

The balls came whistling through the air, or struck up the sand at their feet, but fortunately no one was hurt.

"Form in line," said Dick. "We are going to make a flank movement on them which will sweep them out of that sand bank."

"All right, all right."

In a moment the twelve men were formed in a line, with Joe Taylor on the extreme left, Dick took his place on the right.

Another volley of shots rang out, and as the blue smoke curled up from the sand bank, the bullets rattled above the heads of the officers, but fortunately none were hit.

Two or three cocked their guns.

"Steady!" cried Dick. "Don't fire!"

"But why not shoot?"

"They have our own people in front of them, and we would be butchering women and children."

The complainant said no more. Then Dick cautioned all to be steady, and advance firmly on the line. They started at a walk at first, and quickly increased it to a run.

They were met with a volley, and then the pirates, dropping their guns, stood with pistols in each hand to mow them down at close quarters.

Captain Asbury was a man of wonderful nerve and good judgment. He saw that their friends and rescuers would be unmercifully butchered, and determined to save them.

He made some signs to the male prisoners about him. Fortunately none were bound.

In a moment they were ready to act.

As one man each stooped and seized the muskets the river pirates had dropped, and clubbing the guns, attacked their late captors with a suddenness and fury they were by no means prepared for.

Surprised, beaten down, a foe in their midst, and a far more formidable one coming, the river pirates leaped from their rifle-pits in the sand and ran for life among the woods.

Dick Wright saw them flying, and ordered his men to fire.

As they reached the trees the detectives poured a volley into them, and one man fell beneath the fluttering branches of a cottonwood. No other was hit that the officers could find.

The man killed was one of the three misers from Misers' Island, and as his two brothers had been slain at the hot springs fight, the last of that terrible trio was gone.

The other members of the banditti made their escape from the island to the swamp, and Jesse James—men found him and Frank, and all returned to Missouri, content to confine their operations to land in the future, and not venture on water again.

Dick was welcomed by Captain Asbury and the passengers, and most especially welcomed by Miss Ethel Elliott. With his war tug he convoyed the John J. Roe to New Orleans.

The steamboat actually did have a large amount of gold aboard, concealed in her hull, but the captain himself did not know it. A great portion of it, as afterwards was known, belonged to Ethel Elliott.

Dick and John Flynn returned to the Misers' Island on the upper Mississippi, and by digging at the mound north of the burned house, found the sum of twenty thousand in gold buried there by the misers years before. They divided the find, and with the reward of fifty thousand dollars for their gallant conduct in protecting the steamboat John J. Roe, they were pretty well paid.

Dick Wright and Ethel Elliott were married, and he is still on the detective force, but none of his many adventures are more thrilling than his experience with the JAMES BOYS AFLOAT.

THE END.

Read "THE JAMES BOYS LOST: OR, THE DETECTIVE'S CURIOUS CASE," which will be the next number (22) of "The James Boys Weekly."

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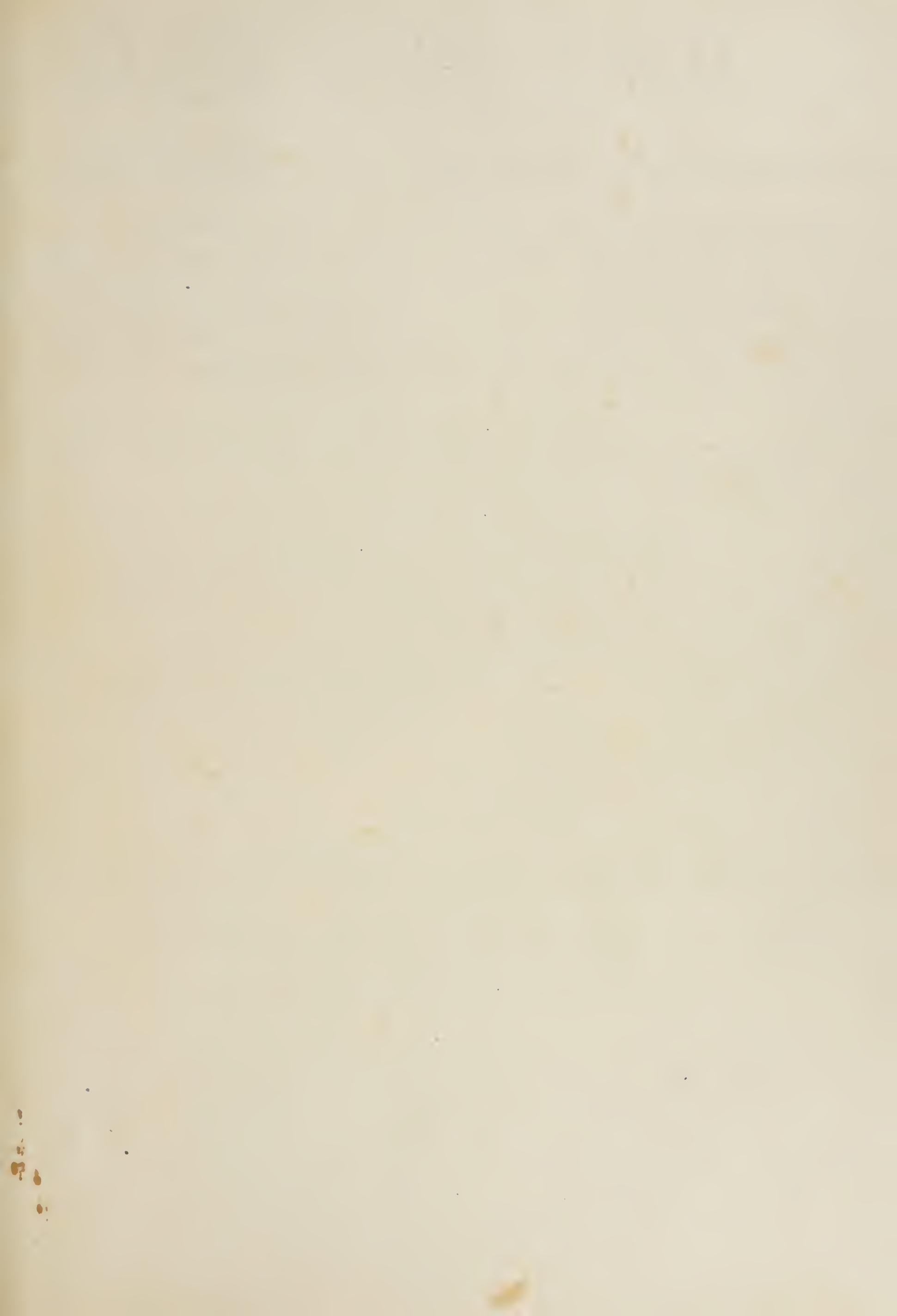
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